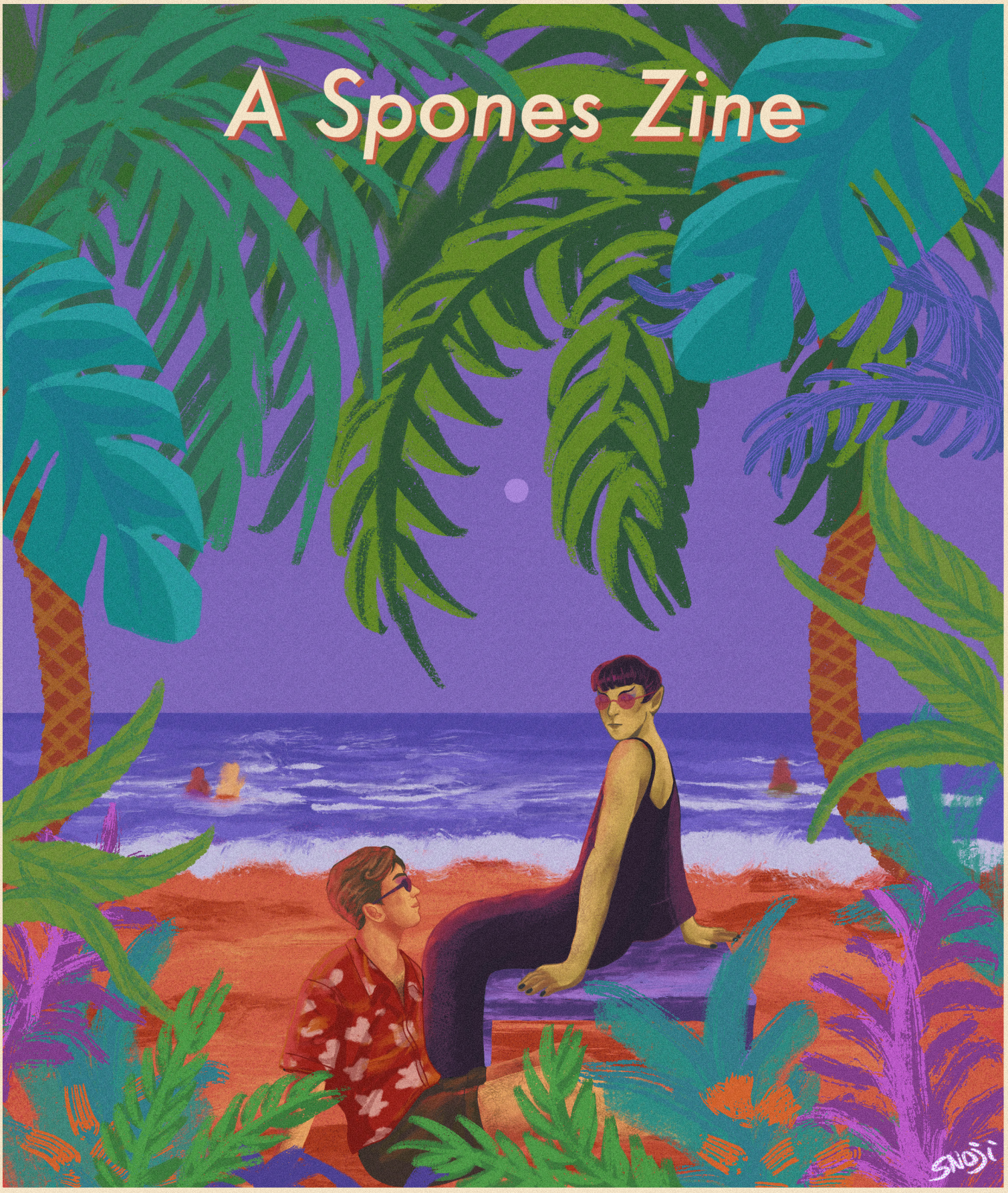
We Go Together



WE GO TOGETHER ZINE

VOL. 1: ISSUE 2 | SHORE LEAVE

FOREWORD

We Go Together: A Spones Zine is a free digital zine featuring the relationship of Spock & McCoy from Star Trek. The zine is open to Spock/McCoy content across all series, shows, movies, books, and universes. This project is intended as a biannually released digital zine with one annual NSFW digital zine, and the eventual goal to provide an annual physical edition.

This zine project began in the summer of 2022 and grew to include members from all areas of Star Trek fans, all united by one common love for Spones. With the support and enthusiasm of other Spones-enjoyers and our amazing contributors, the We Go Together Zine committee is pleased to present to the first Spones-centric fanzine to be published since the Spiced Peaches Zine went inactive in 2019.

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Edited works adhere to SponesZine Style Guide Version 1.0

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Now You Know

by fangirlandiknowit

TOS, five-year mission. What appears to be a bureaucratic mistake labels McCoy and Spock as spouses during shore leave on a newly joined Federation planet. To Jim, they both seem suspiciously accepting of the circumstances.

The sun shone brightly overhead, lighting up the streets between squat buildings. All of them were painted in shades of green, red, and blue, with inlaid decorations of seashells and iridescent pearls giving the whole city the feeling of a seaside tourist shop. It was warm enough that uniforms were borderline too much, and Jim considered the shorts he'd packed an hour earlier on board the ship. There'd be time to explore later, though, after checking in at the hotel and getting their bearings.

He breathed in the fresh, non-recycled air with a pleased noise. He had a tendency to forget how good shore leave could be, and this planet was so far proving his first officer right—shore leave was overdue and necessary and not even the captain was allowed to skip this time. As long as it didn't end up like last time Spock had tricked him into taking some leave …

He glanced ahead at the man in question. Spock was engaged in conversation with Bones, whose hands were waving empathically as they walked. Strangely enough, Spock seemed to have taken over carrying Bones' luggage–perhaps that was the source of the ire directed at him. Jim allowed himself a private little smile. It would be a dangerous day when his two closest friends saw eye to eye, but he'd at least managed to squeeze some joint leave time into the complicated schedule for the crew that Spock had drawn up.

It wasn't that the two of them avoided each other per se, but Spock had a penchant for pretending Vulcans didn't need shore leave, and while Bones never minded tagging along to a bar or two, Jim knew his fingers itched to return to work. The result was that they tended

to compete over who got to stay behind on the ship. This time Jim had put a stop to it. Scotty had some repairs to oversee, and his reluctance to part with the fair lady *Enterprise* had made for a good excuse.

Thus, shared leave for the three of them.

"I'm fine, Spock!" he heard Bones exclaim from up ahead, and Jim's smile instantly dimmed.

There had been some hard missions during their voyage so far, and the run-in with the Vians a few weeks ago had unsettled him. Even Spock appeared softer around Bones now. As captain, Jim had the unenviable responsibility of making the choice in the face of death. His two closest friends hardly respected it. Still, it was his captain's prerogative to die for his crew. Under different circumstances, the disobeying of such direct orders would be cause for reprimand. Jim had merely been grateful they were all still alive, and had since been struggling to put words on the complicated conflict of interest between friendship and the chain of command.

In the aftermath of what Jim in his own mind referred to as 'the Gem incident', all of Bones' complaints and all of Spock's pointed barbs fell flat under Jim's scrutiny. The two of them cared, and they cared deeply. Perhaps they fought over Spock's carrying of the bag because they didn't know how else to express themselves when all that caring had been brought out into the open.

Jim rubbed a hand over his face, trailing after them. He wasn't so sure he wanted to open the figurative can of worms and have them sit down to have an adult discussion about it, but the captain in him knew it might be needed.

Maybe later, back on the ship. He'd speak with them individually first, ask them if it really would be so bad to act more like the friends they were. Their friction had at times sprung up at inopportune moments during missions and red alerts. It wasn't a problem–but he didn't need it to become one either. Something in the tension around Bones' eyes as he loudly called Spock an overbearing mother-hen made him wonder if a storm was brewing.

It was a good thing they'd beamed down later than the rest of the crew, leaving only a few Ermians passing by. Their translators weren't on yet. Spock and Bones' voices had lowered as they walked shoulder to shoulder, as if pushing into each other physically for emphasis. Jim only caught up properly when they reached the hotel they'd picked, by which time they'd fallen silent and easily made room for him between them.

"Greetings, Captain Kirk," the receptionist welcomed them, humanoid apart from an additional pair of arms that looked more like tentacles than arms, and a gathering of feelers at the top of their forehead. "We are honored that Starfleet has chosen our planet for personnel vacation time. I am Neevi, one of the staff members at the Feels-Like-Forever hotel."

The translator stuttered a little over the hotel name, but Jim was used to that sort of thing. He smiled.

"Thank you for the hospitality," he said back. "I'm sure my crew will appreciate their stay."

"We will do everything we can for a pleasing stay. The transport system is at your full disposal, and you need only ask here at the reception if you need any help or guidance. But I must apologize for the near mistake we made with your booking, Captain."

"Mistake?"

He shared a look with Spock, whose raised eyebrow was the equivalent of a shrug. Spock hadn't mentioned any problems acquiring their rooms.

"Yes, indeed, a grave mistake!" Neevi leaned closer, lowering their voice. "Of course, the government is all very anxious to provide the most comfort as a new member of the Federation. I've been researching humans, Vulcans, all the different species aboard your ship, Captain."

They made a wriggly motion with a tentacle, silvery eyes darting back and forth between them.

"The concept of ..." Neevi seemed to struggle a bit, glancing at a screen behind the reception desk. "Mo … noga … my? Yes, indeed, the concept, very strange to us. Separate rooms and not. We had to install locking mechanisms for your crew's comfort. And we had put First Officer Spock and Chief Medical Officer McCoy in different rooms! Oh, they would roll my body in the salts ..."

Blinking in surprise, Jim opened his mouth to ask, but Neevi kept going in some version of nervous babble.

"We have marriage in a way, I suppose, and there are days one needs the quiet ... but the ultimate privacy ... you will notice it's not so important to us. How exciting, I said, to learn all these alien concepts! But when we got the personnel file from your Starfleet organization I almost rolled in the salts on my own! Oh, by the seashells, if my boss had found out ..."

A look at Bones showed no clue or comprehension. Spock, for his part, seemed troubled.

"Excuse me," Spock said, hands clenched around the handles of both his and Bones' suitcases. "Are you implying that Starfleet sent a personnel file in which Doctor McCoy and I are registered as married?"

For one single, short second, Jim had time to find the idea ridiculous. But Neevi wriggled their tentacles enthusiastically, shuffling what looked like data pads and chips around with their hands.

"Of course!" they cried. "And what a horrible mistake on our side to not have understood your booking preferences!"

By his side, Bones was going through the five stages of grief, settling for something resembling barely constrained rage. He hardly dared glancing at Spock.

"I—"

He was interrupted by a data pad held out to him, Neevi all but trembling in supposed agony over the near mistake.

"Please, Captain," they said, adding a little trill of a noise that the translator didn't know what to do with. "I have ensured the utmost comfort. Top floor, neighbor suites, only the best. We are so honored, honored! To host such an important human tradition, though you must explain this moon of honey to me ... but I have taken too much of your dear time! Please, follow Pleer to your rooms, and the utmost pleasure to you and your crew!"

Jim held the pad in one hand, amused and irritated by this latest translation mix-up. He'd be hearing it from Bones as soon as they went behind closed doors, he was sure of it. With another smile and a tight nod, he dutifully followed Pleer towards the elevators, two frighteningly silent officers trailing behind him. The hotel was, at least, rather luxurious. Full of lush greenery inside, and artfully painted walls and ceilings. The hallway in the top floor was a glass cupola, the separate rooms entered through trap doors in the floor.

"Enjoy your stay," Pleer said, "and don't mind Neevi so much. The slightest shadow will rattle them. If you require assistance, use the voice-activated caller."

With soft steps, Pleer disappeared back inside the elevator, leaving the three of them in the glass cupola.

"Well!" Bones said, the word explosive as he turned on Spock. "What makes you think you can go off and marry me without my knowledge!"

"Bones, I'm sure it's all a misunderstanding," Jim sighed, poking at the data pad and watching it come to life.

It opened up to a personnel file, with everyone's accommodations listed. Starfleet had arranged things with the local government, as a sign of trust and possibly to show off their flagship. It was neatly organized and showed hotels, room numbers, and it did list shared accommodations for spouses and other acknowledged relationships.

Finding Spock and Bones, he folded his forehead into a deep frown.

"It does list you as spouses here," he said, looking up when he noticed the silence.

Bones was glaring at Spock, arms crossed, while Spock merely looked back at him as if finding him the height of illogic.

There was something a little charged between them, though. Something Jim couldn't put his finger on. He cleared his throat.

"Gentlemen," he started, ensuring he had their attention. "I'll clear it with the 'Fleet. In the meantime, let's not offend our hosts by kicking up a fuss."

"Jim!" Bones sounded incredulous, arms falling from their stiff hug around his chest. "You want us to actually *share* the room?"

"I want you to not kill each other while I find whoever caused the misunderstanding. I'm sure you can manage it, if you really try."

He gave them both a stern look, then climbed down the stairs to his own room. The trap door shut behind him automatically, and if there was screaming on the other side, it didn't pass through the door. He could feel a tension headache coming along. This was the opposite of what he needed right now. Of all the times for a mix-up, this had to be the worst. He had the sense that the two of them were going to get along like a house on fire in that shared room, and the emphasis was on the fire, not on the getting along part.

He sank down in the nearest seat, pulling out his communicator. At least the *Enterprise* answered quickly.

"I need to send a message to Starfleet HQ, how long is the transmission time?"

"*Approximately one hour*," answered Lieutenant M'mirrr, rolling the r's like Caitians tended to do. "*It's nighttime though, would you like me to send it through as a high priority message*?"

Biting at his lips, Jim considered. It was unlikely they'd appreciate him misusing the priority channel for something like a hotel room mishap, despite the relative volatility of the situation.

"No," he settled for. "Ask them to send me a correct personnel list, updated for disclosed relationships, in the same fashion they sent to the Ermians' government. As soon as possible but not priority."

"*Yes sir.*"

"Kirk out."

He snapped the comm shut, considering his options. He could always share with Bones,

and give Spock some privacy. Avoid upsetting the locals. But he'd been looking forward to some time alone in between sightseeing, damn it! As much as he loved Bones he could be a handful when he found something new and shiny to complain about, and Spock was always new and shiny in regards to complaints.

No, better to let them work it out between themselves. Maybe it would even release some of the tension that had been brewing lately. It was as if the softer Spock became, the tenser Bones was. Outside a life-or-death situation they seemed to thrive on mutual conflict and ribbing. He rubbed at his temples, searching the room for something to drink. There was a small cabinet to one side, with a couple of packages inside that may or may not be refreshments.

No sooner had he stood to head for it than a heavy knock sounded on the trap door.

"Jim!"

Not so soundproof, then. He swallowed down a groan, heading for the stairs instead.

"Open door," he ordered.

It took a moment, but then the translator kicked in and the computer answered. Bones came huffing down the stairs, red-faced and angry as ever.

"Tell me there's something to drink in here," he griped, throwing himself onto the couch-like seating that Jim had previously occupied. "I'm at my limit."

"You're supposed to last longer than five minutes with your spouse, Bones."

The teasing was not received well. At the sight of Bones' scowl, Jim finally went to search the cabinet for something to drink. He found packages of what might be wine, might be fruit juice, and handed one to Bones before taking a seat in the armchair opposite him. The room was spacious, most of the walls and ceiling covered in glass panes. Coupled with the plants growing everywhere and the familiar scent of plant-life it felt a little like a garden rather than a hotel room. A greenhouse, maybe.

"Tell me you'll fix it, Jim."

The dark bags under Bones' eyes seemed more pronounced under the bright sunlight streaming in through the windows. He looked tired, fiddling with the juice box.

"I've requested a fresh personnel file," he replied. "Showing a corrected version should be enough to let them split you up."

"God, I hope so." Bones ran a hand through his hair, elbow digging into a thigh. "He's been driving me crazy, ever since Gem."

"Only since then?"

Jim noted Bones' grimace, then diverted his focus to opening up the drink package. It seemed as if tearing off a piece of one triangle edge did the trick, but the drinking was rather awkward, and the juice too sweet for his taste.

"It's not the normal kind of crazy," Bones muttered under his breath, almost too low for Jim to catch. "And his mother keeps messaging me."

That, if anything, gave Jim pause.

"His mother … the Lady Amanda?"

Leaning back with a heavy breath, Bones gave him a wry look.

"The one and only. At first she just wanted to update me on Sarek's progress, then she asked after Spock and the ship, and now it's definitely some weird kind of mix between insisting Spock won't tell her anything interesting and claiming she and Sarek respect me,

whatever that means."

Jim hummed, placing the small package on the table between them. It was made of wrought twigs, little flowers blooming over it that made him wary of crushing one as he set the drink down.

"Well," he said. "She doesn't message me, at least."

"Lucky you."

Bones held his unopened drink in both hands, staring morosely at it. The packaging was a soft beige, covered in spindly writing.

"We should have brought our own drink. I bet Spock would just love it if there's no alcohol on the whole damn planet."

"Bones, it's not the end of the world. They must have mixed up some names. You know what bureaucracy is like when things are rushed."

It did nothing to ease the look on Bones' face. If Jim didn't know better, he'd say he looked worried.

"I just have this feeling …" Bones trailed off, then shook his head, pinching his lips. "Never mind, Jim. You had an itinerary, didn't you? So, what's first on the agenda, Mr. Tourist Guide?"

"Hardly an itinerary," Jim argued, glad for the change of subject. "Just a few ideas."

Expression softening into something a little more knowing, Bones stretched his legs out and abandoned his drink in favor of taking a sip of Jim's.

"Like drinkin' sugar," he said, wrinkling his nose. "I hope your plans include a good meal and something science-y enough to keep Spock in a good mood."

"You shouldn't doubt me, Bones," Jim smiled. "I've got just the thing."

★✚★✚★

An hour later they entered an underwater restaurant. Bones eyed it with some trepidation, but Spock was immediately caught by the various sea life swimming around them.

"This better be good," Bones muttered as they were led to a private little bubble, surrounded on all sides by water.

The restaurant was shallow enough that the sunlight reached them, lighting up the smooth rocks filled with giant sea anemones and fish and crabs and the like darting in and out between them that made for a pretty view outside the glass panes. The chairs were made of giant seashells, deep but comfortable with fluffy pillows to sit on, and the salty scent made Jim feel like they were part of the ocean.

"Fascinating," Spock said after a quick glance at Bones, whose brows knitted together viciously at the word.

"It's a heritage site," Jim told them, inspecting the interestingly shaped cutlery.

"Heritage? So it's *old*?"

He shook his head at Bones' newfound anxiety as he searched the glass panels for potential cracks.

"The placement and cuisine is old, not the building itself," he reassured him.

"And vegetarian, I'll bet," Bones muttered.

"You may find it enlightening, Doctor. The Ermian culture emphasizes the importance

of living in harmony with the sea."

"I'm sure they'll let you meld with a squid or two if you ask nicely."

"Aquatic life is no less intelligent for dwelling underwater."

"That's not what I said. Stop putting words in my mouth, you damn—"

"Bones!"

Whatever expletive Bones had meant to utter died in his mouth as he swallowed with some difficulty, lips pursed as if tasting a sour lemon. Spock looked unfazed. He picked up the menu, which seemed written on a sheet of pure, iridescent pearl. Unreadable to them of course, but certainly a work of art.

They ended up ordering according to the chef's choice, various small courses served on more pearl and beautifully laid out, if not very tasty.

"Certainly a feast for the eyes," Bones said, but wisely refrained from complaining out loud about the seaweed dangling from his fork-like utensil, while Spock eagerly ate both his own and Bones' servings.

After a few courses, Jim started noticing a strange pattern. Bones would taste the new course, and if he wrinkled his nose, Spock would wait until Bones heaped his leftovers onto Spock's plate to eat it. If he made a choked noise, Spock would simply take the plate from him. If he deemed it acceptable, Spock would discreetly ease his own plate closer and eat slow enough that Bones could sneak some bites off it.

He tried to recall if he'd ever seen something similar before. Though, on the *Enterprise* everyone got what they wanted from the replicators, but maybe it had happened once or twice that Bones tasted Vulcan food off Spock's plate, usually with enigmatic commentary.

Was this what Bones meant about Spock driving him crazy lately? He seemed overly invested in Bones receiving enough nutrients, even while ensuring they didn't offend the restaurant chef by leaving anything uneaten. Jim, for his part, ate it all with only some minor discomfort.

"At least the bread's good," Bones concluded as he tore into his dessert, something closely resembling fluffy, cake-like bread but wasn't necessarily actual bread.

As if waiting for his cue, Spock delicately placed his own bread on Bones' plate. There was no arguing, no acknowledgement other than Bones gleefully ripping this second piece into bite-sized chunks and swallowing them down with satisfaction. When Jim caught Spock's gaze, he looked away as if caught.

"Right," Jim said, drying his hands on a napkin. "Let's pay our respects to the chef, and then we can take a walk along the shoreline. There's a popular pathway that goes up a ways, so we could catch the view before sunset."

Bones gave him an amused smile.

"Spoken like a true tourist guide," he said. "Ever considered a change of careers?"

"I don't have the patience for tourists, Bones."

"I am certain you would excel should you so wish, Captain. After all, you do show some diplomatic prowess."

Jim took offense at the teasing hint to his first officer's voice.

"Only some?"

When Bones laughed, Jim merely sighed and shook his head.

"Let's get moving before I change my mind and ask about squids instead."

"You wouldn't dare," Bones said with a small shiver. "They're half squid anyway. Must be convenient to have four arms."

They made their way back to land without further incident. Bones seemed to have cheered up significantly by returning to dry land, pointing at various plants and animals for Spock to direct his tricorder at as they found the pathway. They weren't the only ones with the same idea, and Jim nodded at a few crewmembers heading back down to the starting point. About halfway up his comm chirped.

"You go up ahead," he said, moving aside to get out of the way.

Bones shook his head disapprovingly, mouthing *shore leave* at him. He must have forgotten Jim was waiting on the updated personnel list. He eyed the two of them heading further up the path for a second, then flipped his comm open.

"Kirk here."

"*Captain, it's Ensign Ali. We've received the updated list. Though the message states that it isn't updated at all, and was in fact correct the first time.*"

"That doesn't make any sense." He hesitated, wondering if the ship's scuttlebutt would have a field day with the info if it was still incorrect. "Read me the relations for Doctor McCoy and Mister Spock."

"*Yes, sir.*" A pause, and then a flustered continuation. "*Um, sir, it says here that Doctor McCoy and Commander Spock are married.*"

Jim swallowed down a curse. Was this someone's idea of a prank?

"I see. I'll have to speak with them directly once shore leave is over then, in order to correct it. Thank you, Ensign. Kirk out."

He stared down at his comm for a long moment. What was it Bones had said … '*What makes you think you can go off and marry me without my knowledge?*' It could have simply been an honest reaction. There was something about the phrasing, though, something that sounded off. He shook his head. They'd tell him if there was something going on. Wouldn't they? Of course they would. He was their friend, as well as their captain. And they weren't such good actors that they could hide something like that.

Annoyed with himself for letting his thoughts run away with him, he started back up the path again. He'd lingered too long to catch up it seemed, getting stuck behind a slow group that seemed hell bent on not letting him pass. When he finally made it to the top, the sun was just hinting at starting its descent downwards to dip below the horizon.

It was a lovely, temperate evening, and all around the plateau was the soft murmur of groups and couples gathered for a look at the city and ocean below. He found Spock and Bones at one end, tucked behind an older Ermian trio and a bush full of fragrant, white flowers. The back of Bones' shoulders were tense as he bounced on his toes, a telltale sign of an impending argument. Spock seemed relaxed in contrast, hands clasped behind his back as he faced the view.

Jim was momentarily caught up by a child running past him, a harried-looking parent following behind, and then remained in his spot as his two friends leaned close in whispered conversation.

The tension was still there, but the sun caught in their hair and cheeks as they turned to one another, lighting up soft features that seemed as close to companionable as he'd ever seen. The moment was broken by Spock's lips moving, whatever words that spilled out of them

sparking the doctor's ire as his shoulders rose, a hand coming up to poke at Spock's chest.

Sighing, Jim hurried to join them.

"—and I wasn't even *close* to the edge!" Bones grumbled, eyes shooting lightning at an exasperated Spock. "What did you think I was going to do, fling myself over it?"

"You have shown some disregard for your own well-being previously, Doctor."

"Pot, kettle! Now, you don't see *me* starting to cry like an anxious mother every time you do something like that, do you?"

"That, Doctor, depends on whether or not you liken the complaints and threats you are so fond of to anxious crying, in which case—"

"Please," Jim said, interrupting them. He held his hands out, palms up. "The view. You can bicker to your hearts' content once we're back at the hotel."

"We're not *bickering*," Bones started, but thankfully quieted down at Jim's look.

Even as they watched the breathtaking view together, Jim couldn't shake off the feeling that he was missing something. The city seemed to glow in the setting sun, pearl-inlaid rooftops shifting in pinks and whites, colorful mortar shaping the walls of the buildings. The ocean was a deep blue melting into the sky, birds chirping along the shore and diving towards the fine sand on the beach in search of food. With the soft breeze wafting flowery scents into their nostrils, Jim had to admit there were worse things than the lingering tension between the two men beside him.

Well, whatever he was missing he would probably figure it out soon, now that he'd caught onto it.

He strategically waited until they were back in the corridor outside their hotel rooms to tell them about the personnel list he'd received from HQ. As expected, Bones exploded at the news, the glass cupola seeming to vibrate with the sound of his voice.

"What do you *mean* Starfleet's got us listed as married! Since when does a man get tied down to another by a simple bureaucratic mistake!"

"I don't know, Bones, I'm just saying there's no easy fix right now."

"You'd think they'd call a man to check!"

"Bones—"

"Spock, even you can't say there's a logical explanation for this!"

"Even so, there is surely an explanation, logical or not."

"This is ridiculous." Bones stormed off, pulling open the trap door to his and Spock's suite and stomping down the stairs as if determined to alert every other guest of his displeasure. "And don't you tell me I'm having an emotional reaction, Spock!"

The words were slightly muffled by distance, but Spock still tilted his head with an arched brow in acknowledgement of the order.

"I believe the doctor is upset at the idea of a marriage without his consent or knowledge," he said.

Jim couldn't help a short laugh.

"Wouldn't anyone be? Vulcans excluded, of course. Will you two be alright, Spock?"

"That remains to be seen. Goodnight, Jim."

With such short parting words, Spock followed after Bones. Jim stood for a minute, hearing only muffled conversation that seemed to trail off, perhaps as they moved out from below the stairs. He sighed, wiping a hand over his mouth and trying to decide what to

do. There was a sprawling nightlife, but the appeal wilted in favor of a bath and a book. If anything, he thought it best to be available, either as mediator or to simply lend an ear.

Strangely enough, neither Spock nor Bones came to bother him during the course of the evening.

★✚★✚★

At the tail-end of shore leave some four days later, Jim sat with a book on smooth, sun-heated rock which formed part of a gently sloping cliff sliding into the ocean, watching his two most senior officers wade through the shallow water with tricorders and net-hoops. They were catching seashells and pretty rocks, feet bare and pants rolled up to the knees, exchanging complaints and encouragement without much difference between the two.

They'd survived their newlywed status with only minor bumps and bruises as far as he could tell, and Jim was starting to suspect that Bones had gone from rage to acceptance to gleeful teasing for reasons known only to himself.

"Hey, that one was mine!" Bones accused, as Spock stooped to pick something out of the water.

"Neither of us can claim ownership over this rock, Doctor." A brief pause. "Interesting. The mineral constituents imply that—"

Bones snatched the rock out of his hand with a triumphant grin.

"Doctor."

"It's *my* rock," Bones said in a sing-song voice. "Or are you going to deny your husband the joy of having found the shiniest rock on the beach?"

"If you had simply asked, Doctor."

Bones tsked at him, holding it close to his chest.

"I was just about to pick it up when you swooped in like some kind of *seagull* and rudely stole it from me."

"There are no birds of the *Laridae* family on this planet."

"Apart from you, you mean."

They stared at each other, Bones with a toothy grin and crinkled eyes, and Spock with something akin to resignation. Jim rested his chin in one palm, watching them watch each other. Out of uniform, they looked like any happy couple celebrating their honeymoon. Bones had pulled his shirt off, skin warming under the sun, while Spock wore a black regulation t-shirt. It was a good thing none of the rest of the crew were present.

Even Jim could hardly believe the sight, and it was right in front of his eyes. That Bones had lured Spock with him into the water in the first place was a feat in and of itself. That Spock allowed Bones to splash him with water and steal his rocks and pretend he had no idea what a mineral even was, well. That was bordering on the impossible.

"Very well," Spock said after their stand-off came to an end.

Fast as a whip he pushed Bones into the water, stepping out of the splashing zone while Bones cursed up a storm. Jim couldn't help the laughter spilling out of him at the sight of Bones, drenched and spluttering, glaring murder at an innocent-looking Spock.

"Oh, you keep laughing, Jim," Bones threatened.

"Thank you, Bones, I believe I will."

Spock trudged up over the stones littered below the rock Jim sat on, hauling himself up to sit next to him. He picked through his findings, tracing a seashell's pattern while Bones muttered below them and shook water out of his hair. If Jim hadn't been paying such close attention, he would have missed the way Spock's gaze strayed from the shell towards Bones only to be reeled back in to focus on the item in his hand.

He filed it under *shore leave oddities*, a list he'd been working on ever since that first night. Returning to his book, he tried to pretend he wasn't listening as Bones climbed up as well, shoving his net towards Spock for categorizing before lying down flat to dry in the sun.

"My poor back's not made for lying down on rocks," Bones groaned, wriggling around a little. "You just *had* to shove me, and I even dropped the rock!"

"A pity," Spock mumbled, the tricorder beeping softly.

"Did you know that *Spock* rhymes with *rock*? You should have just let me keep it. Husband's privilege."

"Going by such logic, I believe a similar privilege would apply to me as well."

"Hardly," Bones snorted. "If it's your fault we're married, then the privilege is all *mine*."

Jim shook his head, amused despite his better judgment. He'd reached an intense part of his book, and their bickering kept distracting him. Still, it was a step above their usual antagonism. A suspiciously high step above, but he wasn't going to say anything.

"I see," Spock said. "I erroneously believed that humans regarded their spouses as equals. You will need to educate me further on this topic."

A glance showed Bones squinting suspiciously at Spock, as if unsure of whether or not he was being serious.

"It's very simple, Spock. I do what I want, and you do what I want, too. This way everyone is happy."

With a groan, Jim pressed the pages of his book against his face.

"I sure hope the marriage *is* a bureaucratic mistake," he muttered, lowering the book again to face the sheepish look on Bones' face. "I'm not sure I'll survive the two of you marrying."

"Oh, shush," Bones said, his cheeks red with embarrassment, as if he hadn't realized Jim was listening. "It was this or give in to insanity."

"Well, count me into the insanity." He ducked as Bones faked throwing something at him, biting his cheek against a grin. "What do you say, Spock? Wouldn't Bones make a terrible blushing bride?"

Spock considered it—the same way he considered any serious topic. The longer he thought, the redder Bones' face became.

"Inconclusive," he settled for, sending Jim's eyebrows skywards and Bones shooting into a sitting position. "His cheeks are capable of increased capillary blood flow, however I do not believe he would appreciate being referred to as a bride."

"I want a divorce," Bones said, scooting closer to steal the tricorder out of Spock's hands. He squinted at the readings, then turned it towards Spock. "It says right here you're a terrible husband."

"It does not."

"It does, it does! I'm a doctor, I'm diagnosing you with terrible husband disease. It's incurable, I'm afraid."

Jim slapped the book against his face again.

"I'm going to find something to eat," he said, getting up with a grimace.

Neither of them paid much attention to him. Jim was starting to regret bringing them on a joint shore leave, but only in the sense that they were having a little *too* much fun by now.

He trudged along the beach, weaving between sun chairs and playing children. It was just warm enough that sweat was starting to gather at his hairline, and he wiped at it absentmindedly while he considered his to-do list upon return to the ship. They had a few more days before the next mission, to allow as many as possible of the crew to get their leave in shifts. Scotty was done with repairs, though he'd surely object to a few days wasted at the seaside.

Shading his eyes with a hand, he caught sight of the nearest food stand. A glance back showed that neither Spock nor Bones were following him, though they did seem rather engrossed in the tricorder readings. Heads tucked together, Spock seemingly uncaring that McCoy got seawater onto his clothes as he leaned close. Shaking his head in wonder, he returned to his quest for food instead. Those two had their moments when they thought no one was watching, and Jim took it for the momentary truce it was—only, this one had lasted longer than ever before.

He wondered what Spock must have said that first night for Bones to appear the morning after with only a slight frown that smoothened out after the first few sips of coffee. Whatever it was seemed to be working, at least. He'd even caught Bones smiling at Spock behind his back.

At the food stand he ordered a large bowl of what looked like fries and cheese cubes. Enough to share, but Bones couldn't complain over what he couldn't see. The fries tasted like cheese and the cheese cubes tasted like lemons, a strange combination that took his mind off his two friends for the time it took him to finish it, while resting an appreciative eye on a few locals playing some kind of ball game that involved very little clothing and quite a lot of rolling in the sand.

They asked him to join, and he happily agreed.

★✚★✚★

When Jim entered the bridge again late that evening, a weight lifted off his shoulders. He breathed in relief, the familiar scent of ship's air and the sight of his chair like a balm to his nerves after being away for too long. Some would say he was married to his job—and they wouldn't necessarily be wrong.

Their ship was a real beauty, and she'd gotten them through enough tough spots that Jim felt it fair to indulge in a little bit of illogical loyalty and appreciation. Though, he supposed he *would* miss the Ermian beach.

"Sir?"

He turned to nod at the ensign manning the communications panel. Uhura was still on leave, and this ensign was junior enough that some shakiness could be detected around the hands as he pressed a button.

"Yes, Ensign?"

"Montclair, sir."

Jim nodded, feeling his fingers twitch with the urge to sit down and familiarize himself

with reports of his missed days. He waited a moment longer, and Montclair caught on with only the slightest delay.

"There's a message for you, sir. Admiral Nogura would like you to call him once you return onboard."

That gave Jim pause, all thoughts of his chair and reports lost.

"Nogura?" he asked. "You're sure?"

"Yes, sir. Would you like me to transfer the request to your ready room?"

"Yes …" Jim turned towards the turbolift, mind working a mile a minute. "Thank you, Ensign."

It was a short trip to the ready room, and yet a multitude of reasons passed his mind along the way. Nogura wasn't just *an* admiral, he was perhaps *the* admiral. It couldn't be good news. But it couldn't be critical news, either, or his leave would have been interrupted.

Deep in thought he sank down in a chair, requesting the computer to show the message. It was short, and to the point. There wasn't much else to do but direct the computer to call the admiral. He got the secretary first and had to spend five minutes in a tense wait until Nogura appeared on the screen.

"*Captain,*" Nogura greeted him. "*It's been some time.*"

Jim inclined his head in acknowledgment.

"It has, Admiral. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

The admiral frowned. He was an elderly Japanese man, with a significant amount of steel in his gaze. Jim swallowed uncertainly, feeling a shiver travel down his spine. Not fear, precisely, but he wondered if he needed to brace himself.

"*Your query about your first and chief medical officers … Jim, I'd have thought a man knew when he was entering into marriage.*"

Whatever Jim had expected, it wasn't this. He blinked, opened his mouth. Closed it again. Nogura took it as permission to continue.

"*It's not really about your officers as such, Jim. I'm unsure of how to explain it, but T'Pau herself sent a stern communiqué regarding Commander Spock. She announced his marriage according to Vulcan tradition, requested it be honored by Starfleet, and all but threatened us with unfortunate consequences should we fail in this and, say, assign him a different posting than his spouse.*"

Jim blinked again, then several times in a row. His brain seemed to fail him as he desperately grasped for something to make sense of the whole thing. Pon farr? The surgery on Sarek? A misunderstanding?

"And this … communiqué. It mentioned Doctor McCoy?"

"*It was as clear as can be.*" *Nogura leaned back, folding his hands over the desk in front of him.* "*So you can understand that when I came to know about your request for correction it occurred to me that we may have a diplomatic incident on our hands, one we cannot afford with the Vulcans at the moment.*"

Slowly, Jim breathed through his nose. In, then out. He flexed his fingers against his thighs, resisting the urge to bury his face in his hands. *Were* they married? T'Pau was hardly a prankster, and while Vulcan culture could be mysterious, surely they wouldn't stretch so far as to prepare marriage documentation for a couple left in the dark about their own union.

"*Jim, tell me. Can you think of any reason for this miscommunication?*"

"Several." He swallowed. Pressed his hands down onto his thighs. "None that would give

us the full picture. I'll have to speak with Spock."

"*Do so. In the meantime, I will put the request on hold. I'd prefer not to have to reply to T'Pau in the negative if I can avoid it.*"

For a second, Jim considered telling Spock and Bones that they may have to stay married simply so Starfleet wouldn't need to embarrass T'Pau. But she *must* have it wrong, he thought.

"Understood. Thank you for your time, Admiral. Kirk out."

The screen turned black. Jim sat for a long minute, staring unseeingly at it. He thought back on Bones' easy smiles with his feet in the water, Spock's quirked eyebrow as Bones declared himself a doctor, not a geologist, even as he listened intently to Spock's steady voice keeping him updated on the tricorder readings.

If they could keep it like that, maybe it wouldn't be so different …

He groaned, scrubbing his palm over his cheeks and forehead. He leaned forwards to press the comm panel by the screen, gritting his teeth at the idea of calling Bones up to bring him the news.

"Kirk to Sickbay," he requested.

It didn't take long.

"*McCoy here.*"

"Bones, could you come up to my ready room?"

"*What, work already? I thought you told us our shifts don't start until morning.*"

Feeling his lips twitch in amusement, Jim tapped a short rhythm with his fingertips on the table's surface.

"And yet I caught you in Sickbay, Bones. You're at least predictable. It's not work, though."

A pause, then, "*Alright, Jim. Be there in a minute.*"

It took more than a minute, or perhaps it only felt that way. Bones came through the doorway with his shoulders hunched and lips pursed, eyes narrowed in suspicion. He looked ready to disagree, like he was just waiting for Jim to announce their alliance with Klingons or suggest clearing out Sickbay to make room for admiral guest quarters.

"Bones," he said, biting at his lip. "Sit."

"Whatever it is, I'm sure Spock started it."

The joke fell flat as Bones noticed the look on Jim's face. He sat, the frown growing more pronounced.

"Maybe he did. I just spoke with Admiral Nogura. You're not going to like this, Bones, but he said the source of yours and Spock's marriage is T'Pau herself."

For a second, Bones looked almost amused. It turned quickly into outrage, his eyes shooting lightning as he shot out of his seat and started to pace the room.

"T'Pau?" he asked, incredulous. "Why would she …"

Jim watched him pace for a moment, grimacing at the sight.

"I don't know, and neither did Nogura. She was rather insistent that Starfleet respect your marriage and keep you together."

The pacing came to an abrupt pause.

"Pon farr," Bones said, expression crumpling into a sour look. "But that's something like six *years* ahead. This doesn't make any *sense*, Jim!"

"No," Jim sighed. "It doesn't. Unless you can think of something I couldn't."

The pacing started back up. The room was large enough for him to take several steps

back and forth along the table, though rather than circle around it, Bones would turn and retrace his steps before starting all over again. His reaction was less than Jim had expected.

"It might be some Vulcan tradition we missed," Jim said, throwing his hands out. "Spock wasn't precisely forthcoming in the aftermath of it all."

"When is he ever forthcoming," Bones snorted. He went over to the comm button by the computer. "McCoy to Spock."

The reply was swift.

"*Spock here.*"

"Get your logical ass over to Jim's ready room, you've got some explaining to do."

There was a brief pause, perhaps for Spock to puzzle over Bones' phrasing.

"*I will be there shortly. Spock out.*"

With pinched lips, Bones resumed his pacing. It seemed now to be more of a way to pass the time rather than anxiety. Jim settled more comfortably in his chair, trying not to stare at him. He searched for something to say and found nothing, no words of comfort or solution. Though, perhaps comfort was a strange thing to offer.

When Spock entered the room, Bones turned on him with narrowed eyes.

"Well?" he asked, placing his hands on the back of a chair and leaning forwards. "Jim here says T'Pau declared us married. Now, why would she do that, Spock?"

Jim glanced between them, awkwardly positioned with Spock at his back. Spock's shoulders twitched, as if he'd clenched his hands behind his back.

"I have no answer, Doctor."

"Then make an educated guess!"

The way they looked at each other confused Jim. A silent conversation seemed to be happening, by way of Bones' raised eyebrow and urgent scowl, and Spock's deadpan expression in return.

"Vulcans do not guess—"

Bones threw his hands in the air, rolling his eyes.

"For god's sake, Spock! Your mother practically *told* me about it! Only I didn't realize what she meant until now. You must have said something to her!"

Jim opened his mouth, but Spock beat him to it.

"To what are you referring, Doctor?"

While Spock *sounded* calm, Jim could see the slight panic in the corner of his mouth and the shift of his eyes between Bones and Jim.

"Don't try to weasel your way out of this conversation just because Jim is here," Bones said hotly, coming around the table to jab Spock in the chest. "You know damn well what I'm referring to. Did you or did you not tell your mother about your whole pon farr business?"

If anything, it served to make Jim even more confused.

"Would either of you care to explain what you're talking about?"

Bones ignored him.

"And did you or did you not tell your mother about the other times? You *lied* to me, Spock. You said they didn't know!"

"It is likely she assumed," Spock said.

"Assumed! Based on *what*, Spock? My reports on your health?"

Spock's expression turned chastened, almost guilty.

"I may have … mentioned your helpful nature and my trust in your medical expertise. And—" Spock paused, swallowing in an uncharacteristically nervous gesture. "I may have mentioned our close friendship."

Bones opened his mouth only to snap it shut again, teeth clicking. He looked baffled by Spock's admission. Jim could relate. He stared at them both, wide-eyed. They were standing chest to chest, close enough to … well, Jim didn't know what to think anymore.

"You mentioned our close friendship," Bones repeated slowly, almost soundlessly, something strange in his expression.

Tilting his face, Spock looked almost confrontational, daring Bones to disagree. Jim realized he was gripping the edge of the table, hard, and forced himself to let go.

"Gentlemen," he said, pushing the chair back so he could look at them both without twisting his neck. "Is there something I should know about?"

Another silent conversation.

"No," Bones said, while at the same time Spock said, "Yes."

Jim stood, one hand on the back of the chair, the other making an aborted motion towards his neck. He waved it at the two of them instead.

"I'll make that educated guess, then."

They were still standing close, and didn't they often? But Jim also often stood near one of the two, or both, and they were all quite comfortable with each other. However, Spock's hands were hanging by his sides, fingers slightly curled towards Bones, and Bones still kept his finger poking into the middle of Spock's chest. A little *too* comfortable, he thought, even when they'd both angled their bodies slightly to face him.

He took in Bones' grimace, Spock's expressive eyes. Suddenly, it clicked.

"How in *blazes* did you keep it from me?" he asked, astonished.

Bones' grimace deepened, and he stepped away from Spock with a jerky motion. To both his own and Jim's surprise, Spock reached out and gripped his wrist before it could lower from his chest.

"There wasn't anything to *keep* from anyone," Bones muttered, glaring at Spock.

"On the contrary, Doctor, the multiple occasions on which we have been intimate should have been disclosed to the captain."

"Never mind the captain stuff," Jim said, wounded. "I'm your *friend*."

"We weren't supposed to end up *married*," Bones argued, exasperated. He snatched his arm back from Spock, shaking his head. "I was just … helping."

Jim eyed him incredulously.

"On multiple occasions?"

"Oh, shut up," Bones grumbled, cheeks darkening with color. "It's not like he told *me* about our supposed *close friendship*!"

"I had thought it self-explanatory."

The look Bones gave Spock was alarmed.

"Now hang on just a minute," he said, fumbling for a chair and sinking down into the seat, slack-jawed with surprise. "You thought we were *dating*?"

Spock's silence was stony.

"Oh, heaven help me. We *are* dating." Bones shook his head, dazed. "And not just that—*married*."

Jim had the distinct feeling he should make himself scarce.

"Likely a mistranslation," Spock pointed out. "While I called T'Pring my wife, we were not officially married. Vulcans have a different concept of what Starfleet views as the traditional human marriage."

"That doesn't make it better, Spock."

Jim cleared his throat but couldn't think of anything to say. Nor did his legs allow him to leave.

"Of course," Spock continued, "there is the issue of … pon farr."

Bones winced. Jim was desperately trying not to put two and two together.

"I thought the fever disappeared after … *after*," he finished lamely.

Bones winced again. Jim decided he didn't want to know.

"I should leave," he said, feeling a little like his fight-or-flight response had been activated. "Leave you two to … work things out."

Spock glanced at him, an arched eyebrow telling Jim his discomfort was noted. He tried not to make it look like he ran off with his tail between his legs as he hurried out of the room and into the cool corridor beyond.

His feet took him to the bridge, and he sank down in his chair with unseeing eyes. So they were married …

He shook his head, trying to tamp down the shock and amusement. Of all the surprises space had brought him, this one must take the prize.

"Spock and Bones," he mused out loud, rubbing at his chin in thought. "Spock and Bones …"

This would require some deep consideration. He tried not to let his thoughts race ahead, to the end of their mission. Spock might get promoted—*deserved* to get promoted—and if so, Bones might go with him. His lips thinned with disapproval at the thought.

No, he'd think about that later … and in the meantime, he could think back on the past year and all the clues he must have missed. In hindsight, perhaps it had been obvious. Feeling his cheeks heat up in embarrassment, he absentmindedly accepted a PADD from a yeoman, glancing at it without taking in its contents. He should have noticed. But they were also better at hiding it than he would have expected.

Running a palm over his face, he tried to shake the thoughts off. He'd speak with them tomorrow, when things had calmed down.

His best friends, married … He shook his head, bemused. It would take some time getting used to. That was, *if* they managed to see eye to eye and accept their newlywed status.

He glanced at the comm button on the arm of his chair, then decided better of it. *Let them have it out*, he thought, lifting his eyes to stare out the viewscreen, at the peaceful planet below. *They're grown men. Surely they can discuss it with reason and, well, logic.*

Grimacing at that last wishful thought, he quietly hoped the shouting wouldn't shake the whole ship.

★✚★✚★

In the captain's ready room, Spock calmly eyed McCoy as he remained in his chair for several minutes, head in his hands and mumbling unintelligibly to himself. It seemed impolite

to interrupt, but knowing the doctor he might go on for some time. Spock cleared his throat.

"Doctor, while the situation is unfortunate, I believe we must discuss our options."

McCoy stilled. His mumbling had stopped, and Spock found himself bracing for the potential fall-out.

"There's *options*?" McCoy asked, lowering his hands to give Spock a look full of suspicion. "I thought Vulcan divorce was a fight to the death, and I'm not particularly keen on a repeat of that."

"The pon farr," Spock said, haltingly, "is not the only way for a bonded pair to separate."

The look turned outraged.

"So you could have just divorced T'Pring earlier?" The doctor's voice steadily rose with each word falling from his lips. "You could have spared us that whole mess?"

Internally, Spock sighed. To explain would be time consuming, and the doctor was in no state to accept the intricacies of Vulcan culture either way. He calculated that a direct approach would give the most favorable results.

"Doctor," he said. "I am not opposed to remaining married."

The shock was palpable enough, even without touch telepathy. Spock felt a minor sting at knowing the doctor thought so little of their relationship that he felt surprise at Spock's words, but quickly dismissed it. McCoy was an emotional man, and likely needed verbal confirmation and reassurance to see matters for what they were. In that, Spock had been remiss.

"Doctor," he said again, then corrected himself. "Leonard. Perhaps I have not been clear enough. For that I apologize. While I am grateful that you aided me with pon farr after T'Pring had rejected me and also for keeping it from Jim that his efforts were not entirely successful, there was no necessity to the subsequent requests for help."

McCoy stood, face contorting in a myriad of feelings.

"You–" he started, then swallowed, bouncing on his soles once. "You said Vulcans needed a certain amount of … stimulation … after their first pon farr."

"That is true," Spock said. "Without a bond, I am particularly vulnerable to aftereffects."

"Alright …"

"However, my requests were mainly of a personal nature."

Choking on air, McCoy's face turned an interesting shade of red. An attractive face, one which Spock had found himself more and more drawn to in the aftermath of his release from T'Pring. He stepped closer, McCoy caught between him and the conference table.

"Leonard," he said, then waited.

McCoy spluttered for a moment longer, then his hands came up to curl into Spock's uniform shirt. While his first priority upon return to the ship had been to don his uniform again, McCoy was wearing a loose blue t-shirt that complimented his eyes. Similar to his short-sleeved medical scrubs, Spock found he preferred this style with a lower neckline.

"This is all going a little fast for me, Spock," McCoy said, though he didn't push him away. "I'm a traditional man … I'm not sure how I feel about a paper marriage I didn't even sign myself!"

"Understood." Spock placed his hands on McCoy's waist, feeling warm skin through thin fabric. Like this, the turmoil of McCoy's emotions trickled through, at once impossible to interpret and clear as day. "I am amenable to a courting period. I am certain that Jim will

consent to wed us onboard the *Enterprise* upon its conclusion."

Underneath his touch, McCoy seemed to tremble. His eyes filled with an unreadable emotion as they widened, his lips parting in slack-jawed reaction. It was, all in all, a rather appealing sight. Satisfied that his intentions had now been declared, Spock pulled the doctor into his chest, breaths mingling as their foreheads touched.

"Spock …"

The whisper of his name sounded intimate, soft. He allowed himself to feel his own desire for this man to become his husband, his mate. It had surprised him at first–this intensity of want–and now it simmered hotly inside him, just below his carefully measured control. His arms slid behind McCoy's back, keeping him firmly in Spock's hold. In turn, McCoy's hands traveled up his chest, hesitantly catching onto the collar of his uniform.

He recalled the softness of McCoy's lips earlier that morning, a stolen kiss in the early hours before McCoy was properly awake and thought to object on principle. He wished to feel them again, trace their shape with his own, uncaring of logic and restraint.

"Do you accept?" he asked, quietly, feeling rapid breaths exhaled against his skin.

"God, Spock, I…" McCoy sounded breathless, hoarse. He'd closed his eyes, fingers clenched tight around Spock's collar. "Yes. *Yes.*"

Spock kissed him.

He kissed him the human way, mouths colliding with a soft gasp from McCoy, a tingle spreading throughout Spock's body at the contact. He wasted no time deepening it, one hand dragging up McCoy's back and up his neck, holding him in place as he tasted him thoroughly, a promise of more to come.

Pushing McCoy more firmly against the table he tilted his head to find the perfect angle, knowing he'd found it when McCoy let out a pleased little noise. Unfortunately, it was accompanied by a determined shove at his shoulders.

"Not here," McCoy hissed, red-faced and attempting to scowl. "What if someone walks in?"

"I believe the door may be locked with an override code."

"Dammit, Spock." McCoy's attempted irritation melted into amusement. "We just had a whole honeymoon and you can't even wait the walk back to our quarters?"

Spock arched an eyebrow, then took McCoy's hands in his, slowly lowering them between their bodies. He did not resist the urge to trace McCoy's fingers with his own, feeling their minds speak to one another in pleasant bursts of electricity.

"Why, I do believe you're feeling impatient, Spock," McCoy said with not a small amount of glee.

"Merely logically concerned with convincing you of my sincerity."

A smile bloomed on McCoy's face, honest and warm, giving Spock an irrational sense of pride at having brought it forth.

"Oh, you've convinced me," he said, lifting Spock's left hand to press his lips to his knuckles. "But I'd prefer you do the rest of the convincing somewhere more comfortable, like your quarters."

The sight of McCoy's lips on his hand made him waver, but McCoy made the choice for them by pushing him aside and heading for the door instead.

"Come on, Spock," he said, throwing a grin over his shoulder. "Shore leave doesn't end

until tomorrow morning, we may as well make good use of the time."

"A logical suggestion, for once."

"Now, you be nice or I won't let you do the Vulcan voodoo thing to me."

They stepped out into the corridor, Spock torn between 'being nice' and pointing out that there was no such thing as Vulcan voodoo, and that McCoy had certainly not complained last time.

Some of it must have shown on his face, because McCoy broke out in quiet laughter and took him by the arm to lead him through the empty corridors of the ship. Spock allowed it–the buzz of positive emotion through the touch was reassuring. Still, there was one thing left to do before distraction took over.

"Leonard," he said as they stepped into the turbolift, doors closing behind them. "I was not entirely truthful earlier when answering your question."

McCoy turned to him with a wary look.

"How so?"

"I …" Spock shifted, glancing at the walls rather than at McCoy. "I may have told my mother of my intention to court you."

McCoy groaned, then said, "I *knew* it was your fault!"

To Spock's great relief, McCoy was quick to forgive him.

★✚★✚★

SLEEPY24

Snapshots

by SpinningWater & Rusoe

A dozen shore leaves, to the tune of Tom Waits.

Underground

With a sigh, McCoy heads back towards his quarters, his discarded dripping wet tunic in hand. He was the one who had pestered Jim about granting leave before the long stretch to their next assignment. It was just his luck that the closest hospitable planet was one that had an environment more enjoyable for Andorians.

Wistfully, he thinks of the slides he had prepped for today waiting in the Xenobiology lab. He had planned on taking a page out of Spock's shore leave book and hunkering down, enjoying some purely curiosity-guided scientific exploration. He still hadn't fully examined all avenues of the Horta research, and was hoping to ask Spock to join him in the lab. Instead he was called down to the surface to stabilize some hapless crewmen after their skiing misadventures. After the hours spent treating them, he can still feel the aching cold in his bones. All he wants now is a hot shower and to collapse into bed.

"Doctor, I am aware of your need to flout orders, but it is particularly illogical for you to disregard your own."

Spock interrupts him right outside the turbolift, a hand at his arm and back, guiding him towards the other end of the hallway.

"You have been assigned this leave rotation, and even if you had been on duty, you have exceeded the recommended hours for your shift."

McCoy finds himself leaning into the touch, the normally cool Vulcan hands refreshingly warm where they rest.

"And where did you think I was just headed, Mr. Spock? My quarters are in the other direction!"

"Yes Doctor, however your leave is this way."

McCoy groans and pushes away. "Spock, I can't stand another minute on that planet. I'll rest my way, you rest yours, how about it?"

Spock raises an eyebrow at him as they enter the turbolift at the other end of the hall. "Does that agreement stand next time you insist on my appearance at one of your nightcaps?" he responds dryly. "Regardless, for once we are in agreement. I have no desire to join the crewmen."

Inside the lift, McCoy slouches against the wall, leaning into the warmth under Spock's arms. If he won't let him go to his quarters, he can serve as his bed for now.

"Please, you love my nightcaps" McCoy teases, smiling up at Spock through half-asleep eyes. "Hey, how about we skip the trip and have one now?" Spock looks at him unimpressed, but McCoy grins even wider at the whisper of two fingers sending warm desire up his wrist.

The lift opens to a floor deep in Engineering, which is now about the temperature of Spock's quarters, but with the lively warmth of a fire. It would be worrying if not for the cozy blankets laid out all over the floor that shape into a bed in the corner. The pulsing impulse engine bathes the room in a dancing orange light.

"Mr. Scott reduced the efficiency of this back-up impulse engine, allowing for greater heat loss. We need to test the ship functioning in suboptimal conditions." Spock explains, hands behind his back, practically standing at attention.

McCoy wanders deeper into the room. He runs his hands down a short table with dinner set for two, alongside a counter with two microscopes, his abandoned slides, and even a single flower decorating the top.

"Naturally, Mr. Spock," McCoy says, picking up the flower to examine its spiky purple petals closer, "and is this set up here part of the experiment? Shall we be test subjects, see how well we can function under these conditions?" He turns back to Spock, and drawls, "Although I have to say, they're feeling pretty damn optimal to me, sir."

"For now, certainly," Spock allows, "but even you must realize that a conclusion cannot be reached with such limited data." His shoulders relax finally, and he joins McCoy, pulls him to sit at the dinner table.

McCoy is gradually warming up from tip to toe, and feels himself melt as Spock massages his neck, stealing kisses as he brushes his thumbs against his jaw. McCoy's head flops back into Spock's firm abdomen and he gazes up at the soft heat in Spock's liquid black gaze.

"Well, how long have we got then?" he asks, and pulls Spock into the chair with him, sending them toppling over, when the answer is all week.

★✚★✚★

Shore Leave

Between the moon and the lanterns strung overhead, the street is bright as day. Tonight, the market seems at its most alive, the sea of people and stalls combining into a sensory experience that would be grating if not for the steady pressure of the hand clasped around Spock's wrist, tugging him through the crowd.

The skewer McCoy buys may be made of fruit, but Spock suspects that its thick sugar coating negates any nutritional value.

"Sure you don't want any?"

"Yes."

"Alright, suit yourself then. More for me!"

The hardened sugar cracks under McCoy's teeth, sending rivulets of red juice running down his hand.

"Damn." A flash of pink tongue pokes out to lick at the mess. Spock watches quietly, only reaching out to grab McCoy's wrist when he's finished cleaning off every finger.

Sticky and red from the sugar and juice, McCoy's lips taste even sweeter than expected.

★✚★✚★

Johnsburg, Illinois

The little bedroom is filled with knickknacks, items that trace the history of its occupant's earliest years.

Spock stands in the doorway as McCoy runs a hand across the dusty dresser, picking up an old, instant camera.

"My daddy gave me this old thing for my tenth birthday. Wonder if it still works."

McCoy's shoulder presses against Spock in the narrow space, the heat of his body a solid presence at Spock's side.

"Say cheese!"

The camera clicks before Spock has time to do anything more than raise a bemused eyebrow. McCoy pulls out the small, paper photograph produced by the whirring machine, holding it up to the light for a better look.

"Hey, not bad. Here, have it as a thank-you for coming out with me all this way."

When they walk back out onto the porch, the paper tucked into Spock's back pocket glows with an illogical warmth.

★✚★✚★

16 Shells From a Thirty-Ought-Six

The tricorder scans the landscape slowly, passing over a jungle of skinny green trees, bare until they reach the top, where they spread out into petal-like white branches of feathery leaves. The foliage didn't leave much room to hide, but his prey was clever. He had followed the subtle trail of bent branches and feathery leaves left in logical patterns, and here it stopped with no whisper left of where they hid.

He calms his heart. He's clever, and can be patient too. He runs the tricorder again, even more slowly. He knows this is the place, can feel it certain in his bones.

There! A brief flash of blue off near the roots of the tree.

He gets closer and sees that what he thought was flat jungle floor dips down into a dry river bed. It's perfect for hiding his approach.

He kneels down and shimmies in, crawls towards where he saw the color, approaching at an angle. The bed pulls him around a rock formation that's larger than it appeared, and he sees the red letters of the shuttle.

Almost there.

He listens out—no one else nearby. And there—a series of white leaves, ending in a black

feather stuck straight up in the ground.

He takes off his outer tunic, swipes the sweat off his brow, softly pads to the back of the shuttle.

Launches himself at Spock, who's pretending to scan the leaves. Captures him in the net of his arms, pulls him in until he can feel both of their hearts.

Smiles into his neck as his prey's arms cage him too. Vows to drive him crazy forever.

★✚★✚★

Town with No Cheer

It's hotter than blazes, and McCoy is bored out of his mind.

"What if we went out for a walk?"

"The average noon temperature here in Shi'Kahr is difficult for even Vulcans to tolerate. You would not find it pleasant."

McCoy sighs. "What do Vulcans do for fun when it's too hot to go outside then? Stay inside and drink?"

"Alcohol is rare here, as it does not affect most of the population. However, many will spend the afternoons engaging in mediation and other forms of intellectual study."

"No going out *and* no booze? Can't you give me some good news for once?"

Spock clasps his hands behind his back, the very picture of innocence. "My parents will not be back until nightfall."

"Why, Mr. Spock," McCoy says, a slow grin spreading across his face. "I do believe I can think of something we can do around here after all."

★✚★✚★

In the Neighborhood

As they wander out of the tourist district, Spock feels the calm return. The *Enterprise* had hosted diplomats for a month, and urgent repairs had left the crew bunking together. While sharing a room with the doctor ended up being more successful than expected, sharing with four others in a semi-private space had been a draining experience. For once, shore leave was much anticipated for him.

It is a popular pleasure planet though, and crowds throng everywhere. Spock and McCoy wander far outside the tourist district in order to get some breathing room. The buildings slowly grow less lustrous, the paths grow emptier of life. Papers drift past along the wind.

None of it catches his interest as he sinks deeper into a light meditative state, the doctor solidly present by his side, both of them drinking up the solitude together..

The silence they bask in is broken by the bright call of a flute.

A boy in white cap and cape marches past them, and behind him a loud raucous crowd spills into the small street. Spock and McCoy are jostled apart as a parade of lifeforms march forward. If Spock were human, he might despair at the brevity of that solitude.

He is, of course, Vulcan,so he accepts the moment, and tries to search for his wayward human.

The loud squawk of disgruntlement helps guide him and he grabs his hand just as a burly gray alien elbows him, crushing him between the aliens behind him.

"Spock!"

He's tugged until he slips out, McCoy holding his hand firm. The doctor has pulled them into an alleyway. The cheering revelers and drums and horns seem endless outside, but muffled in this nook.

It's the first moment they've had truly alone and reasonably private in months. The force of McCoy's rescue has left him sprawled across the bed of a cargo shuttle. He sits up on his elbows and gives Spock a wry smile.

"Looks like we'll have to hang out here for a bit, huh."

"I believe we can use this time wisely" Spock agrees, kneeling to join him.

★✚★✚★

Frank's Wild Years

It didn't feel like life, life after retirement. Like a long shore leave maybe, one of the horrible ones that end up with half the crew in sickbay.

But even in those, he wasn't alone, he was a part of the strange family that made up their crew.

But it wasn't really family, was it? They did their job, finished the mission, scattered apart. That's not family, that's coworkers. He was home now, here with his real family.

It had been awkward fitting back into his daughter's life. Of course they were delighted to see each other healthy and here after so long. But it *had* been so long, and he hadn't been around to learn how to be around her—what her sense of humor was, what was a serious matter, what just ticked her off. There shouldn't be politeness among family, but their interactions would have made a Cotillion instructor proud.

So if it wasn't here, and it wasn't on the ship, where was it?

(He knows, in his heart. It's a million miles away. It's in a desert, on a mountain. It's behind a desk. It's not the ship, no, but he thinks—he thought—he hopes it's the people.)

★✚★✚★

Swordfishtrombone

The door slides open before his hand can even touch the chime.

"You are back a day early."

McCoy grins, all his exhaustion from the long shuttle ride lifting with the unhidden inflection in his mate's voice. "Surprise. Didja miss me?"

Spock tugging him into their quarters is all the answer he needs. The bags are tossed onto the ground as soon as the door shuts, everything forgotten under the hungry press of Spock's lips and hands, their fingers entwining as McCoy is pinned back against the wall.

"That's some welcome alright," McCoy pants when they part, his lungs burning with the need for breath.

Spock gives their clasped hands a gentle squeeze. "I must admit that my efficiency has been somewhat impacted in your absence," he states blandly, his tone belying the warmth in his gaze.

Laughing, McCoy leans in for another kiss.

Yeah, it's great to be home.

Down, Down, Down

Vulcans do not lie. He had heard V'Ger call out to him, and it did bring him back.

What he doesn't share is that someone else had called to him endlessly from the very start of the ritual. He consulted with the master, and he could ignore it, could follow the teachings and repress it. But every day it began anew, requiring his focused dedicated meditation. Greedy, endlessly challenging, it pulled his attention. Would he have still heard V'Ger's call had he not been fighting so many others?

McCoy was the only one besides his mother to—not give him his blessing, but allow that he needed this, for all that he thought it was a "damn fool idea." He did wish him luck in the end. So why was it his voice he heard calling him by name?

(He knows, he thinks. After he allows himself to think of a new future, he hopes.)

★✚★✚★

Soldier's Things

A ridged shell, collected from a Risan beach. A smooth, red rock, its surface still carrying a lingering warmth from Vulcan's dry heat.

Spock had never been one for collecting random souvenirs, but since the day he noticed how McCoy's eyes lit up upon receiving any little gift, it had become a habit for Spock to acquire a small trinket at every unique locale visited.

Spock picks up a bronze knife, bought from a trader on Starbase 76, his fingers running over the swirls engraved into the sheath's surface before placing it into the moving carton.

"You kept all of these."

McCoy looks over at him from where he's busy boxing up some clothes. "Well yeah, 'course I did. If there's not enough space in your quarters, I can have them shipped back to Earth."

Spock shakes his head. "There is space." If not, he knows how to make room.

★✚★✚★

Gin Soaked Boy

"Shpock!" McCoy shouts happily in Spock's ear. "Oh sorry," he whispers mournfully when Spock flinches away, then plants a sloppy kiss on the tip of Spock's ear in apology.

"Doctor, if you do not hold still, you will find yourself closely acquainted with the ground," Spock advises as he lifts McCoy higher to gain a firmer grip while keeping his face safely away from his ears.

McCoy traces his ears with his dexterous fingers, well controlled even with the copious amount of celebrating he had done. Spock ignores the rush of blood to his cheeks, but does turn to give that well-loved palm a kiss.

"Nah, I know you got me."

It's said with such confidence, Spock can't even mind when he passes out on his shoulder.

★✚★✚★

Trouble's Braids

Don't borrow trouble, his mother had always said.

Everything was already set. The leave had been asked for, the invites sent, the venue and caterers booked. Alone in the hotel room, McCoy stares into the mirror, his starched collar feeling all-too-constricting as he tells himself it's too late to back out now.

A chime sounds at the door, startling him. "I'm not ready yet!" he shouts, cringing at the way his voice cracks. "Just give me another five minutes."

The door slides open anyway.

"I said—" McCoy starts to yell, whirling to face the unwanted interloper, but freezing as he meets familiar brown eyes. "Spock? You're not supposed to—you can't be here! It's bad luck!"

"I apologize, but I did not think it logical to prioritize adherence to an outdated Terran superstition over coming to your aid in a time of need."

"Why you nosy, overgrown elf," McCoy sputters, drawing himself up to his full height as he shoves a finger in Spock's face. "I'm not in need! And if you can't tell that, maybe this whole thing is a bad idea!"

Spock just stands there, patiently waiting for him to finish blustering before holding out two fingers. Red-faced, exhausted and raw, McCoy's shoulders slump as he meets them with his own.

With a single touch, soothing waves of calm wash over him, eroding his doubts and fears.

"You and that Vulcan mind-voodoo of yours," McCoy says with an exasperated laugh. "Well, if it all goes to hell, I'll be the first to say I told you so."

Spock looks at him, his answering smile hidden in the crinkle around his eyes. "I would expect nothing less."

And with that, McCoy lets Spock lead him from the room, their last steps together toward the first of the rest of their lives.

★✚★✚★

EddsKa
@guy-in-a-scarf

sharing shore leave

by remylebae

Leonard expects to spend shore leave alone in a mediocre motel, but then Spock arrives at his door and throws a wrench in his plans.

Not a single starbase rivals Yorktown. Most are what Leonard can best describe as average, though upon arrival at Starbase 17 and the room that he will be staying in for the next three nights, it is immediately apparent that Starbase 17 is far, far, far below average.

His lodgings are … Well, he's spent more than his fair share of time in shitty roadside motels, and the familiarities are astounding. Old wallpaper, spongy carpet that squishes under his feet, a bathroom door that doesn't close all the way: all this is familiar in a way that he can't say he missed but he certainly finds amusing.

The amusement fades pretty quick when he drops himself on the bed to test it out. The mattress is harder than it looks and he curses loudly as pain shoots up his tailbone. "Ow," he grunts. "That was stupid."

He's still waiting for the pain to recede when there's a knock on the door.

Leonard staggers forward, one hand pressing firmly into the muscles of his lower back as he crosses the small room. He wonders if he's already earned himself a complaint from one of the neighbors; that cry of pain was pretty loud.

It's no surprise to Leonard that the doors aren't automatic here. He pulls the door open, preparing his best apology to whoever he's managed to piss off already.

"For Christ's sake," Leonard mutters.

It's Spock. Of course it's Spock.

Spock doesn't look thrilled to be there either. He grimaces, glancing over Leonard's shoulder into his room before looking back at Leonard. "I have a favor to ask you."

Leonard studies Spock. He notes Spock's posture, the bag slung over his shoulder, the

general air of exhaustion following him like a dark cloud. Leonard scoffs, leaning against the doorframe. "You can't be serious."

"I wouldn't ask unless it was necessary, Doctor."

"I thought you had your own room! In fact, Jim himself made sure that we all had places to stay after the mess of *last* shore leave!"

Leonard had his own room for that leave too, but of course it became his problem when half the crew revealed they had been too late to reserve a room, and with a farming conference happening at the same time, there weren't any open rooms left. Ensigns slept on his floor and curled up on his spare bed and made his life a living hell for two days straight. Chapel and Rand ended up in the bathtub together at some point. He chose not to ask them any questions.

Spock sets his bag at his feet. "I had a room. It was not acceptable. That is why I am here, asking that you allow me to stay with you. It is only for three nights," Spock adds, as if that makes his request any more reasonable.

"You—seriously? You chose to stay with me? I mean, look around, Spock. Step outside! This isn't exactly the Ritz."

"My previous accommodations were worse," Spock replies flatly. "Believe me, Leonard, my first choice was not to stay with you. Of the four establishments I visited to inquire about their rooms, yours is—"

"—the least sketchy?" Spock nods. Leonard snorts. "I'm sure Jim's staying somewhere much nicer, Spock. Why not bother him?"

The corner of Spock's lip twitches. "He made it clear he has plans that involve having a room to himself."

"Right. And you assumed I wouldn't have similar plans."

"Correct."

Leonard narrows his eyes. "You're a real bastard, you know that?"

"Technically—"

"Just come inside before I chase you off my porch," Leonard says, stepping back inside. "You're lucky I'm feeling nice today."

Spock raises one of his brows but stays otherwise silent, picking up his bag. As the door falls shut, he surveys the room. He sticks his head into the bathroom and pulls back the shower curtain, then sets his things down on a bedside table before he tests the mattress far more delicately than Leonard had.

"This will be sufficient."

"A glowing endorsement," Leonard says dryly.

"My wording was deliberate." Spock turns his eyes down to the bed, then looks back up at Leonard. "Have you already picked a side to sleep on? I do not wish to overstep."

"What, you mean no more than you already have?" Leonard snorts. "I'll take the side closest to the wall. Is there space in here for you to—meditate, or whatever?"

Spock quickly scans the room, then nods. "We will need to push the table into the corner."

The table is heavier than it looks, and by the time Leonard has shoved it aside, he's become deeply annoyed with Spock's presence. He drops himself into a chair at the table, staring flatly at Spock. "I'm going to want to go to bed soon. So, you know. Don't expect me to want to go out with you."

"I have no plans to leave again this evening," Spock says. He digs through his bag and

pulls out his PADD. "I have reading to do."

Leonard watches as Spock proceeds to step out of his shoes, readying himself for bed as if Leonard isn't there. Spock makes no further comment, and with a sigh, Leonard pulls off his uniform shirt and steps out of his pants, dropping them on the floor. He then turns off the overhead light and crosses the room, crawling into bed in just his boxers and undershirt.

He drops his face into his pillow, then turns his head to the side. "Bathroom door doesn't shut right, by the way. Sorry."

If Spock cares he doesn't respond, and Leonard flips himself over onto his other side.

He's too exhausted to care about Spock sitting next to him, legs folded up underneath himself with his PADD on his lap. He *is* curious about what Spock is reading, but that curiosity doesn't beat out his fatigue. He's asleep before he can ask.

★✚★✚★

Leonard wakes once in the middle of the night, confused about where he is—and who he is with. He's so used to sleeping alone, so used to his twin bed on the Enterprise, and when he wakes curled around another person, his arm drawing them close against him, he thinks first of Jocelyn.

He shuffles closer, inhales—

It's not a scent he remembers. He lifts his head, staring down at his bed partner, and in the dark room he can just barely make out the curve of a Vulcan ear.

Oh god.

Face burning, Leonard extricates himself from Spock as carefully as possible. By the time he's removed himself from Spock, his heart is pounding in his chest. He flips over onto his other side, shame coursing through him as he stares at the hideous wallpaper until he eventually falls back asleep.

When he wakes again, Spock is meditating in the spot where the table used to be, so Leonard rises and takes a shower. The water pressure isn't as bad as he expected, and he takes his time standing under the stream of hot water, being a little wasteful now that he's in a place where he can do that without feeling too guilty.

Once he's dressed, he steps out to find that Spock has finished meditating and has dressed as well. His casual wear is … not really casual. He's dressed in all black, and he wears a long-sleeved shirt despite the warm weather.

Spock looks Leonard over, and then they lock eyes.

For one long, painful moment, Leonard thinks Spock is going to bring up last night. He's sure Spock noticed him clinging to him like a koala.

Instead, Spock says, "You are wearing shorts."

"It's eighty degrees out there, Spock. Of course I'm wearing shorts. They're comfortable."

Spock does not comment further, which is good, since Leonard doesn't have the patience to argue about his fashion choices before coffee.

They avoid the breakfast spread offered by the motel and instead walk five blocks north to eat at a diner recommended by a book of local places they found in the motel room. It's not the cleanest looking establishment, but the coffee tastes fine, and Spock is able to order something for himself that he can eat, so Leonard figures by all accounts that this was a win.

As they walk back from breakfast, Leonard inquires about Spock's plans for the day.

Spock hesitates. "Before I interrupted your leave, my original plans were to stay in my room. Starbase 17 has little that interests me. I do not know your plans, but if you will have me—"

"Spock," Leonard groans. "You've gotta be kidding me. First you have me open up my room to you and now you want to tag along with me the whole time? I'm not doing anything interesting. I can't possibly see a reason you would want to join me."

Spock tilts his head to the side. "I enjoy spending time with you, Leonard. I thought that was obvious."

Leonard stares Spock down, waiting for the punchline, but Spock only blinks back at him.

"Okay, fine," Leonard scoffs. "I was gonna go check out the pool next, if that interests you."

Spock moves his hands in a gesture Leonard knows to mean *lead the way.*

The thing is, Leonard enjoys spending time with Spock, too. He's just kind of scared to admit it.

Things haven't been the same since they were stuck together on Altamid. That isn't a bad thing—for the most part, these changes have been good—but Leonard's struggling to put a name to how their friendship has evolved. They enjoy each other's company. Leonard misses Spock when he isn't around. But Leonard won't let himself think any deeper about that.

He doesn't want to get his hopes up. He doesn't want to hurt himself or anyone else again.

They approach the pool. Leonard could tell as they got close that it was too busy to use right now, but as they reach the gate and peer in, it's clear that there are no empty deck chairs left either. The pool itself is crammed full of children playing some sort of game, and as they linger outside of the gate it becomes increasingly evident that, even if there were open chairs, he and Spock wouldn't be able to relax and read with all this noise.

Leonard steps back from the gate and sighs. "Maybe we could check out the gym?"

The gym isn't any better, although Leonard didn't expect it to be. There's two treadmills, both broken. An elliptical, also broken. An exercise bike that produced a weird burning smell the moment he started pedaling, so he jumped off that almost immediately. There's also a rack of dumbbells, but a bunch are missing.

Leonard sags against a wall, groaning. "God, this place is a dump."

"Agreed."

"Any ideas for what we could do?"

"We could …" Spock trails off. "Return to the room?"

Leonard snorts. "And do what? Watch some television and order in lunch?"

"I have a book I brought along to read," Spock replies in the way of an answer, and Leonard huffs.

Great. Their first shore leave in months and they're gonna spend it locked away in a gross motel room. If Leonard wanted to spend shore leave in a cramped room, he would have just stayed in his quarters back on the ship.

"I don't see any good alternative," Leonard says, walking out of the gym. "Unless you want to go get hammered at a nightclub."

The alarmed look Spock sends him in response makes Leonard erupt into a fit of laughter.

"I'm kidding, Spock. Let's go back to the room."

Leonard stretches out on the bed once they're back in the room as Spock settles into one of the chairs at the table in the corner. Leonard turns on the first movie he finds, some old western, and it captures Spock's attention for *maybe* five minutes before he stands abruptly and announces that he is going to take a shower.

Spock prefers sonic showers, but clearly a water shower is better than a boring old movie.

Either Spock takes a short shower or Leonard manages to doze off in the middle of it because he startles to the bathroom door opening once more as Spock steps back into the main room. He's got his pants on but is shirtless, skin damp and flushed from the hot water with the towel around his shoulders. Leonard can see a droplet of water drip from Spock's hair to his shoulder, then down through the forest of hair on Spock's chest.

Leonard looks away before Spock can catch him, his cheeks burning. He keeps his eyes glued to the screen, scared that he'll make a fool of himself if he looks at Spock again.

He must be doing a little too good of a job staring at the movie, though. Spock sits down on the bed next to him and asks, "What did I miss?" and all Leonard can do is shrug. Out of the corner of his eye he can see that Spock still hasn't put on a shirt.

"Do you want to order something now?" he asks, taking the question as an excuse to reach for the book of local restaurants. "You, uh, may want to put your shirt on. For when our food gets delivered."

He risks a glance back at Spock; Spock watches him for a beat before nodding.

Leonard breathes a sigh of relief as Spock pulls on his shirt. He doesn't think he would have been able to focus on picking something to order with Spock so close to him like that.

Leonard stares down at the book in his lap and tells himself to not think about *that* any deeper.

★✚★✚★

That night, Leonard stares up at the ceiling, unable to fall asleep.

He'd thought he'd be able to fall asleep easily if Spock was meditating instead of in bed with him, but somehow it's worse. He knows, rationally, that Spock is not watching him sleep, but having someone sit on the floor across the room facing him is giving him the heebie-jeebies.

Though Leonard does suppose he is touched that Spock trusts him like this. He's pretty sure Vulcans wouldn't meditate around just anybody.

Leonard doesn't realize he's fallen asleep until he jolts awake hours later as the mattress dips underneath Spock's weight.

"My apologies, Leonard," Spock says, pulling back the sheets and sliding in underneath them. "Go back to sleep. I didn't mean to wake you."

Leonard does as Spock asks, flipping onto his other side and—

And Spock curls up around him.

"Spock?" Leonard says softly, something warm twisting in his chest.

"Sleep, Leonard," Spock replies.

Leonard doesn't think he'll be able to fall back asleep with Spock spooning him. His heart

is racing in his chest at the feeling of Spock's warm breath against his neck, and his brain is trying desperately to fight against the fogginess of sleep to make sense of what this means.

But Spock's body is warm, and it feels so good to be held like this. Ultimately, sleep returns to Leonard easily.

In the morning, Leonard rises before Spock, though he's sure that Spock is awake. He takes a long shower and thinks about Spock spooning him, but his brain can't make any more sense of last night even now that he's awake. Maybe Spock was cold. Or maybe Leonard was hogging the bed and that was the only way that Spock could fit.

Or maybe he thought that was what Leonard wanted.

Leonard grimaces. He wouldn't want Spock to feel forced to do something like that. He'll have to talk to him before they go to bed tonight and make it clear that he doesn't expect Spock to hold him.

Spock joins Leonard in the bathroom once they're both dressed to brush their teeth. It's a boring affair, bordering on amusing, and Leonard keeps his eyes away from the mirror so he won't laugh and spit toothpaste everywhere over how meticulous Spock is with his dental hygiene.

Leonard rinses his brush off in the sink. "Still glad you chose to spend your shore leave with me?" he jokes. Leonard thinks he could list a thousand things more entertaining than running through his morning routine with another man.

Of course, since Spock is Spock, he gives Leonard's question serious consideration.

"Seeing as the alternative would have been to spend my time with the captain or return to the Enterprise, yes. As I said yesterday Leonard, I enjoy your company."

"Oh, come *on*," Leonard huffs. "This is boring! No matter how much you might like spending time with me, you can't possibly be having fun right now."

"'Having fun' is irrelevant and also is not my goal for this shore leave. The purpose is to relax and reduce stress, which you may note I have done quite successfully."

Leonard can't argue with that, but it takes some effort to resist making fun of Spock for not wanting to have any fun while on vacation.

"Well, we've got the entire day,' Leonard says, "and I'm going to lose my mind if we spend any more time doing nothing in this motel. What do you say we go for a walk?"

Spock agrees, and once their shoes are on, they start on their walk. Starbase 17 isn't a complete bust—there is a walking path that, if they were so inclined, could take them through the entire starbase—but Leonard worries they'll get lost, and he knows from experience that there are few things worse in the universe than getting lost with Spock. Spock, of course, believes that with such good signage that it would be impossible to get lost, so the first half of their walk is spent debating that issue.

But somehow the topic moves on, and it's only when Leonard is in the middle of a story about sailing with his great grandfather that he realizes that Spock has been silent for a long time, listening.

"Sorry, am I boring you?" Leonard asks, stopping in his tracks. They're walking past a row of silver office buildings that aren't the most visually stimulating. "I can talk about something else."

Spock's brow furrows. "No, Leonard. I am interested in your story."

"Oh." Leonard hesitates. "You're not just being polite, are you?"

Spock looks at him pointedly, and Leonard laughs.

"All right, yeah, you're right. You've never been one to suffer through something because you felt you had to. You'd have said something."

"Please, finish your story."

So, Leonard does. Spock's eyes remain on him, and the entire time Leonard has this sort of light, weightless feeling in his chest, like he's about to start laughing at any moment. Sometimes it's like this between him and Spock. When it's going this good, Leonard feels weird. Touched, maybe. Appreciative. And something else, something he's hesitant to put a name to.

"I only went sailing once," Spock says after Leonard's finished his story, and Leonard stares, surprised. Spock adds quickly, "It was with my mother's family, on a trip to Earth when I was a child. She felt it was important that I spent some time with my cousins on her side of the family."

"And how was that for you?"

Spock grimaces. "I fell overboard. I am not the strongest swimmer now and I was a worse swimmer then. I have avoided sailing ever since, minus the situations in Starfleet and at the Academy that have required it. I do not voluntarily go on boats."

"Good thing I didn't plan to rent one out today then, huh?" Leonard chuckles.

It's quiet for a beat as they walk. When Spock speaks again, his voice is soft. "I would have made an exception."

Rendered mute by this admission, Leonard's cheeks burn. He clears his throat and turns his gaze to the path, nodding towards the signage ahead. "We should think about turning back soon," he says, too cowardly to stop himself from changing the subject.

Spock nods.

Later, once they've returned to their room and showered, they decide to have an early dinner. The restaurant they found has mixed reviews and seems a little too fancy for what they're looking for, but it offers vegetarian options so they decide on that one. It's busy; they end up at a small table in the corner, the table tiny enough that their knees touch underneath it. It's so loud inside that Leonard has to lean in to hear Spock talk, and he wonders if it looks like they're spies, exchanging information in secret.

The thought amuses him, but before he can point out how they look to Spock, a waiter approaches them.

"Evening! You lovebirds here for anything special? Honeymoon? Anniversary?"

Leonard freezes. His eyes snap over to lock with Spock's, who looks equally startled by the question.

Laughing awkwardly, Leonard says, "Ah, no. And god, who'd honeymoon here?"

Offense flashes across the waiter's expression, and realizing his mistake, Leonard quickly adds, "Ah, just kidding. Beautiful starbase you've got here. This restaurant looks just—just lovely. Wouldn't you agree, Spock?"

"The menu has many offerings suitable to my needs," Spock replies, and Leonard swallows back a curse.

"Ah, you know how Vulcans are," he says to the waiter, and the waiter nods, his lips thinning in displeasure.

The waiter is quick to take their orders. "Enjoy your date, gentlemen," he says, then

leaves them to themselves.

Leonard sighs, leaning back in his seat.

"You did not correct him the second time," Spock says.

"He was already leaving," Leonard says, but it's a poor excuse. Why didn't he make it more clear that they weren't together?

"I see," Spock replies, in that preoccupied way that tells Leonard that Spock is thinking. It makes Leonard's stomach twist anxiously, and he distracts himself by taking a long sip from his glass.

The food is mediocre, but it arrives quickly, and for that Leonard is relieved. If Spock has strong feelings about his dish he does not comment on it, though Leonard isn't able to stop himself from complaining about the blandness of his chicken, on par with the usual garbage from a replicator.

The waiter comes by towards the end of their meal. Leonard expects their bill, but instead the man drops off what looks like a chocolate-covered tart.

"Free," he says dryly, "for the happy couple."

Leonard squawks, but his noises don't manage to stop the waiter from walking away. Spock eyes the whole exchange curiously.

"Fascinating. Do couples often receive desserts for free?"

Leonard's sure he's blushing. "Sometimes. Though this one felt kind of pointed."

Leonard picks up his spoon, parting the tart down the middle. It's as he's starting to push half of it towards Spock that he stills. "Oh. It's chocolate. Sorry, Spock."

Spock, to Leonard's surprise, picks up his own spoon. "Do not apologize. We are on shore leave. As I have no duties to attend to, I will partake in this dessert."

Spock breaks off a large spoonful and brings it to his mouth. Leonard stares as he swallows it down.

"Jim's going to be so jealous when he hears that I got to see you get drunk."

"You will tell him no such thing," Spock replies, but he doesn't seem that bothered by Leonard's comment, going in for another bite.

Leonard snorts, batting at Spock's hand. "The waiter said it's for the *couple*, Spock. We're sharing."

Spock obliges.

★✚★✚★

Spock didn't get drunk, though he seemed tipsy as they left the restaurant. More than once Leonard caught him smiling on their walk back to the motel, and man if that didn't make Leonard's heart race a little with conflicting feelings of apprehension and affection.

They're sitting in deck chairs by the pool now that it's finally empty. Leonard had suggested they sit and read, but even now that Spock has sobered up, neither of them are finding much success in focusing on their PADDs. Spock has, for some reason, moved his deck chair close to Leonard's. Maybe he doesn't want their conversation to get too loud; it is late and there are rooms nearby.

"I have an article to show you," Spock says at one point during a conversation about Spock's recent research. He sets aside the PADD on his lap and stands. "I will get the other

PADD from our room.

He has always walked at a fast pace, but he moves quickly now, clearly excited about the paper he wants to show Leonard. He turns around a corner of the pool heading towards the gate.

But Spock takes the turn too fast. Spock slips on the wet concrete, stumbling, and Leonard's stomach drops as he watches Spock fall into the pool.

Spock is not a strong swimmer.

Leonard stands before he can think, doesn't even stop to strip out of his clothes before he steps up to the edge and dives in.

It's a mess trying to pull Spock up to the water's surface, but it only takes seconds for both of their heads to be above the water. Leonard's heart is racing with adrenaline and he gasps in air, his hands on Spock's shoulders and face as he makes sure that Spock's breathing.

"You're okay, right? Are you okay, Spock? Can you breathe? Can you—"

"Leonard, please," Spock replies firmly, a little too put together for a guy who took a surprise swim. "I am not harmed. I was startled but would have been all right. I can swim."

"You said—"

"Leonard, you know that Starfleet officers are required to learn to swim if they do not already know how at the Academy. I am not a strong swimmer but that doesn't mean I do not know what I am doing."

"Right. I knew that," Leonard replies. He's embarrassed, but as he stares at Spock, wet bangs plastered to his forehead and shirt clinging to his chest, Leonard can't help but realize the humor in this situation. He erupts into a fit of laughter.

He can't stop. He almost swallows a mouthful of pool water as he bends forward in his laughter, but Spock rights him, his hands lingering on Leonard's face, and *woah* is he a lot closer than Leonard thought.

"Spock—?" Leonard starts, but then Spock is kissing him.

Leonard freezes. It takes a few seconds for him to react, parting his lips and leaning in closer to kiss Spock back. But how is this even happening right now? There weren't any signs that Spock wanted this. Sure, they just split that dessert, and yes, Spock kept reminding him that he liked his company, but—

Leonard stops himself in the middle of that thought.

Suddenly the last few days make a hell of a lot more sense.

Leonard pulls back, breaking the kiss. "Now hang on, Spock! This was all a trick, wasn't it? You just wanted a reason to be alone with me! Hell, I bet your original room wasn't even that bad!"

"Oh, it was," Spock says. He hasn't pulled away, and his brown eyes keep dropping to look at Leonard's lips in a way that makes Leonard feel *very* warm. "But a new room at the captain's hotel opened up yesterday. I could have left if I wanted."

"But you didn't want to."

"I had reason to believe that if I continued to spend time alone with you that I would find answers to some questions that had been bothering me."

"And what questions were those?" Leonard asks.

Spock leans in and kisses him again, this time gentle and quick. "I had to confirm whether or not you felt the way I feel about you."

"So this whole thing was you testing your theory." Leonard scoffs and rolls his eyes, but he can't stop himself from grinning. "Ever the researcher, Mister Spock," he says, and then they're kissing once more.

Leonard is happy to continue doing this for a while, but then he hears the gate open. "The pool is closed!" an irritated voice calls out, and Leonard and Spock startle apart, staring sheepishly back at the woman glaring at them.

They're quick to get out of the pool and gather their things. Unfortunately, their impromptu swim means they're soaking wet and without towels.

Leonard shivers. "We'll have to take turns showering once we're in the room. I'm cold, which means you must be freezing."

"There is no need to take turns," Spock replies, setting his gaze on Leonard. "As you suggested with our dessert, I suggest now that we can share."

Spock following one of my suggestions, Leonard thinks with a grin. *How could I possibly say no?*

Later, Leonard lies with his head on Spock's chest, stroking his fingers through the hair there. Spock is warm, and they both seem to be enjoying the comfortable silence, so Leonard doesn't dare speak.

Maybe this motel isn't that bad. With Spock holding him like this, it's hard not to develop a strange fondness for the mediocrity of this base.

Spock shifts, pressing a kiss against the top of Leonard's head.

All right. Maybe Leonard *can* think of a reason someone would choose Starbase 17 for their honeymoon after all.

★✚★✚★

Compatible

by swimmingwolf59

Six times McCoy and Spock have to postpone their dinner date due to an argument.

Pacifica

McCoy finishes making their dinner reservation, pleased that he managed to nab a spot.

He's been wanting to try this restaurant, an extravagant place along the shore of Pacifica's Western Sea, for ages, but it's always been a bit too expensive to justify going there on his own. Now, however, he has a boyfriend he wants to pamper, and he knows that Spock appreciates the culinary arts as much as he does, so the price will be worth it.

It's still hard to believe that they're *finally* going steady. He and Spock have been dancing around each other for so long that at one point McCoy had considered just giving up on the whole thing altogether. He's glad now that he didn't, and that Spock didn't either, because their new relationship has been an absolute joy since then. McCoy hasn't had a courtship that was so much *fun* in a long time, and he wants to savor it as much as possible.

It's inordinately difficult to fit quality dates in on the *Enterprise*, however, and McCoy is so sick of replicated food that he can hardly stand it. Thankfully, shore leave is approaching soon, and Jim had picked one of McCoy's favorite vacation spots of all time.

A lovely dinner planet-side with a breathtaking view of the ocean and the stars is *just* what the doctor ordered.

Ever the romantic, McCoy plans to surprise Spock, so he stores the reservation confirmation in a deeply embedded folder on his computer and tries not to bounce too much and give himself away in the meantime.

On the day of, McCoy picks out one of his best outfits to wear, shamelessly wanting to show off. He pulls on a button-up shirt with blue, purple, and green stripes, rolls up his

sleeves to expose his forearms, and leaves the top two buttons undone so that some of his chest is visible. He squeezes into a pair of tight black jeans and then finishes off the look with a silver chain comprised of tiny, symmetrical loops. Spock always gets a little hot and bothered by perfect geometric shapes, and McCoy isn't above using that knowledge to his advantage.

He rubs his shirt flat in the mirror, nods in satisfaction, and then heads for the Bridge.

He finds Spock sitting in the captain's chair—apparently he's already bullied Jim to take his leave, which is a relief, because now McCoy doesn't have to do it himself. McCoy saunters up to Spock, taking him in. He's always thought that Spock looks good in the command chair, though he hardly ever gets to enjoy the view since him being there usually means that something horrible has happened to Jim.

He allows himself a brief moment to fantasize about pinning Spock to the chair, and then steps into his usual place by the left arm. "Mister Spock."

Spock glances up from his PADD, his features softening. "Doctor."

"You ready to head down to the planet, or do you need a few minutes?" McCoy asks, leaning on the back of the chair. "I have a little surprise for you."

Spock's gaze lingers, taking his time looking him up and down. A thrill shoots through McCoy, and it's so thoroughly distracting that he almost misses Spock say, "You will have to surprise me here, Doctor—I am not taking shore leave."

For an eternity, McCoy just stands there, uncomprehending. He must have misheard him. "What?! What do you mean you're not taking shore leave?!"

"It is usually an extravagant waste of energy and time," Spock says. "If the point is to rest, then I can better serve that goal here."

McCoy's heard that simple logic so many times. *So many damn times* and yet, for some reason, he had stupidly thought that it would be different now that they're dating. After all, the point is no longer to rest, but to spend quality time together, away from the ship and their fellow crew members.

It probably would've been smart to mention that to Spock beforehand.

"But I—you—!" McCoy lowers his voice, trying to rein in his temper, and whispers harshly, "I made a dinner reservation for us, Spock!"

"You will have to cancel it, Doctor," Spock says calmly. Calmly! "I already informed the Captain that I would take command of the ship for the duration of shore leave."

McCoy's mouth drops open. He's all too aware of how quiet it is on the Bridge, how obvious it is that the skeleton crew is pretending not to eavesdrop on their conversation. He and Spock haven't necessarily decided to hide their relationship, but they haven't told Jim about it yet, and McCoy doesn't think Jim will ever forgive them if the news reaches him via scuttlebutt first.

So he probably *shouldn't* shout, "I'm trying to take you on a *date*, Spock!" like he so desperately wants to.

Instead, he grinds his teeth angrily and tries to think of something that will persuade Spock to leave. "The restaurant has a magnificent view of the Phoenix meteor shower, which is predicted to peak in a few hours."

Spock raises an eyebrow. "I'll admit that is tempting, Doctor. But I cannot dismiss my duties for such a personal reason—especially since I can view the meteor shower from here."

McCoy steps back, hurt despite himself.

"… Duty. Of course," he says, his voice completely flat.

Spock frowns at him, and McCoy berates himself for being so petty. He understands that Spock can't just abandon his responsibilities to go on a romantic date with him. His duties to the ship take priority—McCoy's would too if their roles were reversed. If he'd wanted to go on a date so badly, he should've told him beforehand so Spock could go through the proper channels and delegate his responsibilities to someone else. McCoy should know that surprises don't really work well when the chain of command is involved.

But he's so frustrated by how little Spock seems to care that he can't bring himself to be reasonable about it.

So he stomps off of the Bridge, not sparing Spock a second glance. He goes to the restaurant alone, and resolutely tells himself that he doesn't care, either.

The expensive bill that gets forwarded to his account a few days later only serves to rub salt in the wound.

★✚★✚★

Andoria

The next time shore leave comes along, McCoy doesn't bother with surprises. That failed so spectacularly last time, and ended with them not even having a date, so this time he makes sure to warn Spock a week in advance.

"You're taking this shore leave off," McCoy says firmly while they're lying in bed together that evening. He doesn't phrase it like a question. "I'm going to make a reservation for us for dinner."

Spock stares at him. He looks about ready to argue, but what comes out is, "You seem inordinately preoccupied with forcing me to take shore leave, Leonard."

"I'm not just trying to force you to take shore leave for the sake of your health, though I worry about that, too," McCoy says. "It's mostly that I think shore leave is the best chance we're going to get to spend some time together romantically. It's the only time we're away from the ship and prying eyes and ears."

"… Ah." Spock rubs his hand along McCoy's bare shoulder slowly. "You were upset last time because you considered my refusal to mean that I did not wish to spend time with you?"

"I was mainly mad that you made me waste 500 credits," McCoy mutters. Both of Spock's eyebrows fly up. "Yes, Spock, that's why I was upset. I wanted to go on a date with you and you refused to even leave the ship."

"… I see." Spock moves his hand down to rest it gently on McCoy's wrist instead. "That was not my intention, Leonard."

McCoy sighs loudly and flips his hand over to take Spock's hand in his. "I know it wasn't, and that I should've explained all of this to you beforehand. I guess I just wanted to surprise you."

"For what purpose?"

McCoy almost snaps something angry, unwarranted, but he stops to ponder the question. Why *had* he wanted to surprise him? What was so important about the surprise, when spending time together was what really mattered?

You never surprise me anymore.

"… Ah." McCoy rubs a hand through his hair and then says, "I just realized it was something left over from my marriage. Pretty illogical to apply it to us, huh Spock?"

"Perhaps, but it is understandable." Spock carefully doesn't meet McCoy's gaze as McCoy's eyes widen in surprise. "I sometimes find myself approaching our relationship as I would have with T'Pring."

"Guess it makes sense." McCoy hums thoughtfully. "Our brains get used to the pattern of those relationships, so we have to remind ourselves that it's different now."

Spock's quiet for a moment, and then he says, "If you wish to surprise me, I would be amenable."

McCoy snorts and pats Spock's hand. "Thanks, darlin', but it really doesn't matter—just spend this shore leave with me, and I'll be happy."

Spock kisses McCoy's fingers with his own. "Very well."

Shore leave arrives soon after, and McCoy excitedly beams down to Andoria with Spock beside him. They've just gotten done with a long and exhausting survey mission in a solar system just outside Andoria's corner of space, so Jim had thought that taking shore leave as soon as possible would be preferable to traveling to one of the Federation's more common vacation spots. It's a bit unfortunate that they're vacationing somewhere so cold, when the Moski solar system had also been cold, but McCoy isn't complaining. He can't wait to spend some time off-duty, eat delicious non-replicated food, and devote all of his attention to Spock.

The restaurant they're going to is also famous for its vistas. Andorian cities are all underground, due to the near perpetual ice age that covers the planet's surface, but this restaurant sits high above a bustling metropolis, having been carved into the side of a mountain to provide stunning above-ground views. Not only that, but the tuber root soup is apparently to die for—McCoy hasn't had a lot of opportunities to visit Andoria, so he's excited to try it. He hopes that Spock will enjoy it, too.

Though it may not have been his best idea to pick a location that requires a hike up the interior of a deeply cold mountain. It's the middle of summer in Andoria's southern hemisphere, but even with several layers on McCoy can feel the icy wind slice through his body. He bundles closer to Spock and hooks his arm around his, knowing that he'll be even more affected by the cold. Spock had to wear five layers to survey the Moski solar system, and even then McCoy thought he caught him suppressing a shiver from time to time.

McCoy notes the stylish gloves and knitted cap Spock is wearing with approval. "Glad you thought to bundle up. Sorry it's a bit far."

Spock places his gloved hand over McCoy's. "It is no trouble. I too am intrigued to try the soup."

McCoy grins, pleased. They arrive at the restaurant soon after, and the waiter leads them to a table with a view like McCoy had requested. The restaurant is nestled between three massive mountain ranges, their peaks bold and stunning with their deep white caps and purple bodies.

As they sit down, McCoy notices with some confusion that Spock takes off his cap but doesn't remove his gloves. Usually he hates having anything on his hands, as they're so sensitive that every minute shift of the fabric pokes at his nerves unpleasantly. And it's warmer in the restaurant than it was in the corridor on the way up, as they get a lot of

tourists and therefore keep the heat closer to comfort levels for humans and Vulcans. There shouldn't be any reason to keep his gloves on.

"Are your hands still cold?" he asks, shrugging out of his jacket.

"Negative," Spock says. "I simply do not wish to remove my gloves when I'll just have to put them back on again."

McCoy frowns. "You planning on leaving in a big hurry?"

Spock's eyes widen slightly. "No, of course not. I simply—"

"Forget it, Spock, it's fine," McCoy interrupts, not wanting to get caught in an argument. He looks out the window as he picks up a menu. "It sure is a stunning view, isn't it?"

"Indeed," Spock says, following his gaze. "It's not often that I get to see mountains encased in such spectacular glaciers."

"It hardly ever snows on Vulcan, right?" McCoy asks.

"Correct. Even when it does, it never stays at those temperatures long enough for glaciers to form."

The waiter comes over to collect their orders, and then leaves with their menus. McCoy reaches across the table and rests his fingers on the bare skin of Spock's wrist that pokes out just below his glove. It's not generally publicly acceptable to hold hands in Vulcan culture, so McCoy will often touch Spock elsewhere instead, just to be close.

Sometimes it's still hard for him to believe that he's allowed this.

Spock glances at him, warmth in his gaze, and presses his knee to McCoy's under the table.

"Thanks for taking shore leave off," McCoy says softly. "I know you don't often see the logic in it."

"No, however you are correct that it is logical to utilize it to spend time together."

McCoy grins. "I love when you tell me I'm right."

Both of Spock's eyebrows raise, and McCoy chuckles fondly.

Their wine and appetizer arrive, something called 'chozi' that seems to be similar to a dumpling. McCoy's never heard of it—Spock had ordered it, claiming that he thought McCoy would enjoy it.

"One of the chief engineers of the *Enterprise* under Captain Pike was an Andorian," Spock says. "He had a passion for cooking, and we used to make this dish together with Captain Pike."

"I'm excited to try it, then!" McCoy says. It's so rare for Spock to mention people from the past that he realizes it must be important to him. He grabs a chozi with his chopsticks and takes a bite. "Mmm, it's wonderful! I wasn't expecting the vegetable inside to be bitter, like bok choy, but it compliments the sauce perfectly. I'd like to try the ones you make, too."

"I would be honored to make them for you," Spock says softly.

Hearing this would normally make McCoy's stomach flip, but he's distracted as he watches Spock reach for his own chopsticks, nearly imperceptibly wince in pain, and then settle his hand on his wine glass instead.

McCoy puts his chopsticks down. "What was that just now?"

Spock glances at him sharply. "… Nothing."

"Okay then." McCoy crosses his arms and fixes him with a hard stare. "Pick up your chopsticks."

Spock stares at him for a moment, and then reaches for his chopsticks again. Just as he's about to pick them up, however, his hand seems to cramp up. He gives up again, letting his hand fall gently to the table.

"You can't, can you?!" McCoy snaps, alarm rising in him. His brain quickly sorts through the facts: they've been working in a cold environment a lot recently, Spock hadn't wanted to take off his gloves, he seems to be experiencing pain and enough stiffness in the joints to interfere with normal functioning … All of this would seem to suggest—

Spock shakes his head slowly. "It is minor, nothing to be concerned about—"

His voice had been slightly slurred.

"And where did you pick up your medical degree again?" McCoy barks, immediately getting up from his chair and going over to Spock. He presses the back of his hand to Spock's forehead as he peels off one of his gloves, staring in dismay at the hard, waxy-looking skin he finds underneath. "Spock! This looks like advanced frostbite—how in the world did—?"

He stops, realization dawning on him. "You didn't wear your gloves during our surveys, did you?"

"They interfere with my work—" Spock protests weakly.

"Then you could've at least come to me afterwards to treat it!" McCoy snaps, digging around in his bag for his medkit. "This is dangerous, Spock, you could lose your fingers! Not to mention you probably have hypothermia, too—!"

"Leonard, I am fine," Spock says forcefully. "Try more of the chozi."

"Forget about the chozi, Spock!" McCoy growls, stabbing Spock with a pain relief hypo. He then picks up his communicator. "McCoy to *Enterprise*—"

Spock grabs for his communicator, but his hands are so stiff and clumsy that he only manages to knock it to the floor.

"What the hell are you doing?!" McCoy shouts.

"We must finish our date, first," Spock says sternly. "You told me that our dates mean a lot to you, that they make you happy. The same is true for me, as well."

For a moment, McCoy is so stunned that all he can do is blink at Spock in shock. Then, his eyes soften as he reaches up to caress Spock's face. "I appreciate what you're trying to do, Spock, but your health is more important to me. There will be plenty of other shore leaves for dates."

Spock searches his face, looking unconvinced, but he doesn't interfere this time as McCoy grabs his communicator again. McCoy asks the waiter to charge the chozi and wine to his account, and then beams back to the ship to care for his stubborn Vulcan.

★✚★✚★

Babel

McCoy and Spock lurk in the banquet hall outside the council chambers on Babel, having accompanied Jim to the diplomatic conference.

McCoy wasn't originally going to beam down, but since Sarek just came out of surgery, he wanted to be close by in case something went wrong. So far, though, there's only been a seemingly never-ending amount of talks that don't seem to be going much of anywhere. At least the negotiations are done for the day and everyone has moved on to the eating and

drinking part of diplomacy—McCoy's favorite part.

He and Spock are supposed to be mingling with the delegates, but McCoy's had to do basically all the talking so far. He wouldn't mind normally—he enjoys mingling—but after everything that's happened, he doesn't have the mental energy to withstand such prolonged and complex conversations by himself. Spock will respond if spoken to directly, but his attention is very obviously on Sarek, who's discussing policy with the Tellarites on the other side of the room. The tension between him and his father hasn't waned at all, apparently.

McCoy blows out a frustrated breath and eyes the food tables. He's not really in the mood for a semi-date night either, but if he has to wear his dress uniform, he can at least try to enjoy the function. And Spock seems like he could use a distraction. "Spock, when we're done here, do you want to have dinner together? I know they're just fancy food tables, but it could still be nice."

"Yes, Doctor," Spock says, though McCoy's not sure he really heard him. He's still looking at Sarek, a complicated expression on his face.

McCoy sets his jaw. That's another thing he's frustrated about—Spock hadn't given him *any warning* that Ambassador Sarek and Amanda Grayson were his parents, that McCoy should prepare himself for meeting his partner's parents for the first time. Instead, he found out when Jim did, which had been an incredibly awkward situation for all involved. He's been panicking about it ever since, as he has no idea if he should introduce himself to Sarek and Amanda, or if Spock's even told them about him, or *anything*! And everything's been such a mess that he hasn't had a chance to talk to Spock about it, leaving him with his anxiety for *days*.

A diplomatic function isn't really the place to have such a personal conversation, but McCoy's anxious and annoyed enough about it that he decides to have it anyway.

"Why didn't you tell me that Ambassador Sarek was your father?" he murmurs, trying to keep his annoyance out of his voice.

Spock finally glances at him. "I did not see a reason to."

"Didn't see—?" McCoy's mouth dangles open. "How on *Earth* did you reach that conclusion?!"

Spock frowns at him, obviously confused by McCoy's reaction. "My parents came on board the *Enterprise* for a work function, not a personal matter. I did not predict that you would interact with them at all."

McCoy frowns too. "You weren't planning on introducing us?"

Spock blinks. "Not at this time."

"What, am I too embarrassing to bring home?" McCoy snaps, suddenly hurt.

"Of course not," Spock says sharply. "Leonard, you know I cherish you. But I am not close with my parents. I haven't told them about any of my past relationships, besides my engagement to T'Pring, which they of course already knew about."

"But knowing who your parents are is still something I should know as your partner, isn't it?" McCoy demands. His heart's beating fast from Spock's admission of affection, but he doesn't want it getting in the way of their argument just yet. "I mean, you never even mentioned that your father was a Federation ambassador!"

"I fail to see why you are so upset by this when you hardly ever mention your own family," Spock counters. "I was unaware of your daughter's existence until point two months ago.

She doesn't yet know of our relationship either, correct?"

McCoy sputters and throws his hands up in the air. "That's different!"

Spock raises a single, unimpressed eyebrow. "How so?"

"She's not coming aboard any time soon, so you're probably not going to meet her for a long time," McCoy says. "There was no reason for you—or her—to know!"

"There was no reason for you to know who my parents are, either."

"Of course there was!" McCoy growls. "I'm your damn partner! I wanted to give them a good impression of myself, but instead all they saw was a grouchy, commandeering fool!"

Spock frowns again. "I know for a fact that is not the impression you gave."

McCoy scoffs. "That's not the point! It's a big deal for me to meet your parents, but you caught me unaware!"

McCoy's voice is getting too loud—people are probably staring at them, though he doesn't turn away from Spock to look. Instead, he runs a frustrated hand through his hair and forces his voice down to a quieter level. "We're getting stuck on a cultural difference, aren't we?"

"I believe so," Spock murmurs. "As most marriages and partnerships are arranged on Vulcan, families are aware of each other long before the actual bonding happens. There is no need for 'meeting the parents', as you put it."

McCoy nods thoughtfully. "Where I'm from, it's a huge deal. When I met my ex-wife's parents, I put on a suit, spruced up my hair, suppressed my accent, *everything*. I think I was more dressed up then than I was for our wedding!"

Spock's eyes dance with humor as he takes a step closer. "It must have been of gargantuan importance, then, for you to put yourself willingly through formal attire."

McCoy snorts out a laugh, smiling despite himself. He feels a lot lighter now, all of a sudden. "It was important, to me anyway. Just as it was important to me to make a good impression on your parents, too."

Spock considers this for a moment, his eyes flicking over McCoy's shoulder. "… Leonard—"

"What's the deal with you and your father, anyway?" McCoy continues. "The tension between you two is so thick you could cut it with a knife."

"Leonard—"

"Your parents are still your parents even if you're not close, you know? Maybe they'd like to have an excuse to reconnect with you, if they don't know how to do it themselves." McCoy shakes his head mournfully. "I mean, if I found out my daughter had a partner and she never invited me over to meet them, I'd be—"

"*Leonard!*" Spock interrupts forcefully. The sudden *growl* in his voice makes arousal shoot through McCoy's body and his jaw snap shut. "They are putting away the food and tables—we will not be able to have dinner."

The arousal leaves as quickly as it came. "What—?!"

He whirls around and finds that not only are people packing up the food and tables, but everyone else has already cleared out of the banquet hall. He, Spock, and the employees cleaning up are the only ones left in the whole room. "Aw, hell!"

Spock touches his wrist regretfully. "I apologize that we missed dinner yet again, Leonard. I know that you look forward to eating non-replicated food."

McCoy sighs and crosses his arms. "Well, I guess it's my own damn fault for getting so caught up in everything. I don't really have any right to lecture you."

"Perhaps not, but I have upset you, and for that I apologize." Spock shifts to rub his fingers along McCoy's. "However, please know that I cherish you, and that will not change, regardless of my parents' opinion of you."

McCoy flushes, smiling as he presses his fingers back against Spock's. "I love you too, Spock. And for the record, I *do* want you to meet my daughter someday, and my mom."

"Just as I would like you to properly meet my parents," Spock murmurs. "Perhaps when my father is not having a heart attack."

McCoy snorts. "Sounds good to me, darlin'."

They return to the ship soon after, where McCoy unfortunately does not enjoy a non-replicated meal. But at least afterward, Spock helps him rid himself of that horrid dress uniform.

★✚★✚★

Transporter Room

It has come to Spock's attention that he and McCoy have not had a satisfactory shore leave date in a very long time. (9.672 months to be exact.)

That is not to say that they haven't had dates—they have had many dates consisting of many different locations and activities. But they have exclusively happened on board the *Enterprise*. While Spock doesn't mind this, he knows that McCoy enjoys spending time together off of the ship, on 'solid ground', as he would put it.

However, shore leave does not occur very often, and even when they *have* planned a shore leave date, ninety-nine point six percent of them were thwarted by an ill-timed argument. Additionally, one hundred percent of them were planned by McCoy—considering that he and McCoy have always been equals in all forms of their partnership, this is unacceptable.

Spock decides that he must try to rectify this. As first officer, he receives advance notice on when and where shore leave will occur, so he has plenty of time to do research and plan something for him and McCoy.

Right before shore leave is scheduled to start, however, the *Enterprise* encounters an abandoned ship with minimal life support drifting on the border of Federation space. They don't know it at the time, but the ship is leaking some type of radiation that isn't detectable by any of their scanners. When the away team beams aboard to try and figure out what happened to the ship and its crew, they experience intense pain and radiation burns almost immediately. The radiation is so strong that it's even affecting people who haven't left the *Enterprise*, quickly leading to a drastic medical emergency. People are succumbing to radiation sickness at an extremely rapid pace, leaving very little time for McCoy, Chapel, and Spock to discover the source of the sickness.

The situation is under control now, but McCoy has essentially been on his feet and working for the last forty-eight point two hours, having only taken a few short hours intermittently to nap. And yet, now that the crew is convalescing and the ship is on much needed shore leave, he insists on having their date anyway. Spock wants to argue, but the thought of how long it's been since they've had a shore leave date stills his tongue. He knows how important these dates are to McCoy, and if he believes he is well enough to have one, then Spock will at least try to make it work.

As soon as they're in the transporter room, however, Spock knows that it's an exercise in futility. McCoy looks imminently close to collapsing, exhaustion wafting off of him in waves. He also seems to be having difficulty focusing on what he needs to do to ascend the stairs and step onto an available transporter pad.

Spock frowns slightly. "Leonard, are you sure that you wish to have our date? You require rest."

McCoy flaps a hand at him dismissively. "I'm fine, Spock. Once I get down there and walk around a bit I'll wake up."

Spock highly doubts that McCoy is in a state where he can walk at all, let alone to the restaurant. He sighs. "Leonard, forcing yourself to go on a date is illogical and entirely against the point."

"But I want to eat non-replicated food," McCoy grumbles even as he yawns into his fist. "And I love you—I want to spend time with you."

Spock flushes slightly, quite aware of Lieutenant Kyle at the transporter controls. He's perfectly in earshot but obviously trying very hard to pretend like he isn't. "We can spend time together when you are not on the verge of collapsing."

McCoy shoots a glare at him. "I said I'm fine, Spock! I'm the one with the medical degree. Beam us down, Mister Kyle."

"Belay that order, Lieutenant," Spock says sternly. "Doctor, you claim that you have a medical degree, and yet you consistently disregard your own health. I will never comprehend that."

"*I* disregard my own health?!" McCoy barks out an incredulous laugh. "What about you, Mister 'let's have a date even though I'm suffering from advanced frostbite'?"

"If you recall, we interrupted that date so I could receive medical treatment," Spock argues. "Or has your exhaustion also led to a lapse in your memory?"

McCoy inhales sharply, his face contorting in outrage, but before he can say anything, Kyle interrupts, "Um, are you two beaming down or not? The Captain says there's a line forming—"

"We are," McCoy barks at the same time that Spock says, "We are not."

"Dammit, Spock!" McCoy snaps.

"How come we must terminate our date for the sake of my health, but continue it at the expense of yours?" Spock demands, trying and mostly failing to suppress his frustration. He steps down from the transporter pad. "Come, Doctor, we can continue this argument in your quarters, once you have slept."

"I am *not* leaving this *damn spot*—!" McCoy snarls, before suddenly swaying and toppling forward without warning.

Spock darts forward to catch him, alarmed for a moment before he realizes that McCoy has only—quite literally—fallen into a deep sleep. Shaking his head in exasperation, Spock puts one hand under McCoy's knees and lifts him, his other hand supporting his back.

He turns to face Kyle and lets out a breath. "My apologies, Mister Kyle. We will not be beaming down."

Kyle nods, a badly hidden smile on his face. "Understood, sir."

Spock carries McCoy out of the transporter room and past the very long line of crew members waiting to beam down to the surface. Kirk is standing at the end of it, all the way

down the hall, and he crosses his arms and raises his eyebrows as Spock walks up to him.

"It'd be nice if you two could argue on your own time," he says pointedly, his brows creasing as he stares at McCoy's face. "Is Bones okay?"

"He will be, as his exhaustion ended up outweighing his stubbornness," Spock replies. "I apologize for the delay, Captain—I hope you will still enjoy your shore leave."

Kirk sighs dramatically. "Well, I guess I still have *some* daylight left." A grin quickly replaces his pout. "Take care of Bones for me, alright?"

Spock nods and then continues down the hall. He takes McCoy to his own quarters, laying him down gently on the bed. He turns the thermostat down, as he knows that McCoy never feels quite right when it's a normal Vulcan temperature, and then tucks a cool sheet over him. McCoy stays asleep through all of this, a telling sign of how exhausted he truly is, as he's usually a light sleeper.

Sitting on the bed next to him, Spock rubs his thumb gently along McCoy's cheekbone, comforted as always by the dull thrum of his emotions against his fingers. McCoy is quite possibly the most stubborn person in the known universe, and yet it only illogically increases Spock's fondness for him. He enjoys arguing with him, and their minds have always been highly compatible. Though he had once thought that their prides would clash too much to allow a romance between them to work.

Considering how often they've had to cancel a date because of an argument, perhaps there's some truth to that. But Spock's grateful that he didn't let that stop him from pursuing this, from pursuing McCoy—he would rather delay some dates with ill-timed arguments than not be in a relationship with him at all.

McCoy is *everything* to him. He wants to spend his next shore leave with him too, and all shore leaves after that. As much time as he possibly can.

Coming to a decision, Spock quietly moves to his computer and books a reservation for their next shore leave.

★✚★✚★

Corynetes

A few seconds after McCoy's shift ends, Spock appears in front of McCoy's desk and, without preamble, says, "We are going to dinner now."

McCoy blinks up at him. He and Spock haven't planned anything for this shore leave, so he'd assumed that Spock was being stubborn about not wanting to leave the ship again. He'd been brainstorming ways to wrestle him from the Bridge or the lab or wherever he'd rooted himself, so he's surprised, but *delighted*, that Spock has come to him instead.

He grins and throws down his stylus. "Right now? Why the rush?"

"Because if we wait, we will no doubt have a disagreement about something irrelevant and we will have to postpone," Spock says, humor tugging at his eyes and lips. "Again."

McCoy chuckles and stands up from his chair. "That's certainly true. I take it you have a plan for us then, darlin'?"

Spock nods as he steps closer to McCoy, brushing his fingers lightly along McCoy's wrists. "I do."

McCoy hums, pleased, and puts his hands on Spock's waist as he leans in to kiss him.

"Guess we better get going, then!"

The *Enterprise* is currently orbiting around Corynetes, a small planet in Vulcan's solar system. Vulcans colonized the planet almost as soon as they achieved space travel, so Vulcan culture is just as deeply rooted there as it is on Vulcan itself. It's one of the Federation's most popular shore leave spots, as it's much further out from 40 Eridani A and therefore has less of a hot and arid climate.

McCoy suspects that this is precisely why Spock is taking him to Corynetes, not Vulcan, and he can't help but be touched by his thoughtfulness.

Spock takes them to an intimate tea shop, a little hole-in-the-wall just off the main road going through Cith, one of the less popular tourist towns on Corynetes. Because of that, it's not too crowded, and the atmosphere is quiet and calm.

It would be in poor taste to have an argument here, which must be why Spock chose it.

McCoy chuckles to himself at the thought as he slides onto a cushion across the table from Spock. The other customers in the tea shop seem to be couples as well, and the tables and seats are arranged in small nooks scattered throughout the room. The design is perfect for a private and intimate date.

It's a wonderful choice.

"This is great, Spock," McCoy says as he starts thumbing through the menu already set out on the table. "I love the ambiance in here."

"I thought you might approve," Spock says, sounding pleased.

Smiling, McCoy reaches out to touch Spock's wrist, and keeps his hand there as he returns to the menu. It's mostly a drink shop, which seems like an odd choice for dinner now that McCoy's thinking about it, but they do have some light meals as well. The last time McCoy was on Vulcan, Sarek had made some truly wonderful pok tar—a flatbread-type of dish topped with spicy vegetables—for him, so he decides to order that when the waiter comes around.

"I'll also have a coffee," he says, shutting the menu.

All heads turn to stare at McCoy suddenly, including Spock's. McCoy shifts slightly, uncomfortable with all the attention. He doesn't know what he did to deserve it. He knows that Vulcan is primarily a tea-drinking culture, but it's not like it's unheard of to order coffee—it'd been on the menu, after all!

Spock sets his menu down. He almost looks *devastated*—but that can't be right. Why would he be? "Leonard, you do not wish to try the spice tea?"

McCoy shakes his head. "Nah, I tried it on Rigel Prime and didn't like it too much. It was a bit bland."

Spock's mouth drops open slightly. "*Bland*?"

"Yeah, it tasted like vaguely spice-flavored milk to me," McCoy says, frowning. He could've sworn he told Spock about this before. "I'd rather have coffee."

It's dead silent in the tea shop.

"… It is illogical to prefer coffee to tea," Spock says stiffly. Any humor and warmth that were in Spock's face and tone before are suddenly nowhere to be found. He'd removed his hand from beneath McCoy's as well. "Coffee is known to be associated with heart failure, increased heart rate, and high blood pressure, and can also lead to anxiety and impaired sleep. Tea, on the other hand, provides many of the same health benefits that coffee does without as

much associated risk. As a medical professional, you should be aware of this."

"Oh my God, Spock!" McCoy hisses, his ears burning. He can still feel the other patrons in the shop staring at them as if someone was stabbing him over and over with a Klingon pain stick. "I'm sorry, okay? But when the hell have you ever cared that I drink coffee?!"

Spock's eyes shift past McCoy's ear. McCoy clicks his tongue in annoyance. Spock can be stubborn enough as it is, but as soon as he stops making direct eye contact, McCoy knows that there's little hope of avoiding a fight.

So much for not having an argument in the tea shop.

"This shop is renowned for its tea," Spock says tightly. "I simply think you should try it—I doubt it'll be anything like what you had on Rigel Prime."

McCoy hums doubtfully. "Maybe, but I'd rather get something that I know I'll like."

Spock stares at him, that same strange hint of sadness in his expression, and then suddenly gets up and walks away.

"Wh—?!" McCoy can't even get a word out before Spock has left the shop entirely.

The other customers start murmuring to each other—mortification washes over McCoy. He's so angry and befuddled that he can hardly think straight. Why was Spock so insistent about the goddamn tea?! And how was that argument bad enough to warrant just *walking* out on McCoy like that?!

McCoy mulls over their conversation to try and figure out what he could've done—or said—wrong. Maybe he's missing something culturally. He's familiar with a lot of Vulcan culture because of his time working with Vulcans on Rigel Prime, but he doesn't know everything, especially since he's never actually lived on Vulcan. A tradition surrounding a tea shop does feel familiar somehow, but he can't quite remember what it represents … If it was important, though, wouldn't Spock have said?!

… No, of course he wouldn't have, who does McCoy think he's dating, anyway?

McCoy gets up and runs after Spock, expecting him to be halfway down the street by now. To his surprise, however, he finds Spock sitting right outside the tea shop, his hands steepled in contemplation. He looks up as McCoy comes to stand right in front of him.

"Is there a reason you wanted me to order the tea?" McCoy asks, trying to keep his tone even. "Because if it was really about my health, we would've had this argument a long time ago."

Spock considers him for a moment and then says, "It is custom on Vulcan for couples to share spice tea together when they are considering marriage. The tea tends to enhance one's senses, especially telepathy, so that the bonding couple may more easily share their thoughts and desires. Many bonding shops, like this one, have been created for the purpose of providing an intimate setting for couples to propose."

Spock lowers his hands to his lap. "As you have worked with Vulcans for many years and are thus knowledgeable about a lot of our customs, I assumed you were familiar with the tradition, but turning me down. I tried to express that I found marriage between us logical, to convince you, but you still refused."

For a long time, all McCoy can do is gape at him. He slowly collapses onto the bench beside Spock, knees suddenly weak. "Hold on, back up. Are you saying you want to *marry* me? That you were trying to *propose* to me?"

Spock continues looking straight ahead, not at McCoy. "… Yes."

McCoy sits back, floored and giddy and flabbergasted all at once. This has come out of nowhere—they've been together for several years now, but Spock has never once let on that he's been considering marriage. McCoy certainly hasn't been thinking about it, not after the disasters that were his last two marriages. And anyway, how was McCoy supposed to realize that *any* of what Spock had said about fucking tea was actually a metaphor for *marriage*?

But he loves Spock, of course he does. He definitely wants to spend his life with him.

As pig-headed as he is.

"Then maybe you should've *told* me that, darlin', instead of just speaking in strange metaphors," McCoy says, but he's smiling. He's smiling so wide that his cheeks hurt. "I'm not familiar with the spice tea tradition. No one was trying to propose to me on Rigel—"

Or were they? McCoy suddenly remembers why this whole thing has felt vaguely familiar—a Vulcan he'd dated a long time ago *had* taken him to an intimate tea shop, just like this one, on Rigel Prime. It was where he'd tried the spice tea, barely stopped himself from spitting it out, and told them that he didn't like it.

Had they actually been proposing *marriage*?! In that context, McCoy's behavior was absolutely atrocious.

He puts a shaky hand over his mouth. "Spock, I think someone *did* try to propose to me. They took me to a tea shop, I had the spice tea, told them I didn't like it—" He's suddenly struck by an insane fit of giggles and it takes all of his effort to swallow them back. "That was horrible of me, wasn't it?"

"Indeed," Spock says, but the humor's back in his eyes as he finally turns to face McCoy. "I take it they terminated your romantic involvement after that?"

"They did! I never understood why until now!" McCoy lets out a bark of a laugh. "Hell, Spock, would it kill Vulcans to *explain* important customs like that?"

"It is not our way. However, it seems that they and I both may have been in error—though it is to my fortune that they were." Spock rubs his fingers slowly along McCoy's wrists as he looks directly into his eyes. McCoy holds his breath in anticipation, his heart beating fast. "Leonard, will you marry me?"

"… Despite us standing each other up in that tea shop just now?" McCoy says, pure joy pumping through him as a giddy grin once again stretches across his cheeks. "Yeah, Spock, I will."

Spock straightens, obviously pleased, and presses his fingers against McCoy's in a kiss. McCoy leans in and kisses him on the lips too, his free hand coming up to cup Spock's neck. For a moment, there's nothing in the universe but the two of them, parted and never parted, never and always touching and touched. McCoy has always found the ancient Vulcan words for addressing a fiance or spouse beautiful, but he's never really understood them until now. Spock completes him, but even connected to him like this, he could never have enough of him, never get tired of feeling his warmth and tasting his mouth and listening to his mind.

They part from the kiss slowly, reluctantly, but stay conjoined at the hands. The benefit of Vulcan kissing, particularly when they have the habit of getting into an argument over everything.

"Why do they even have coffee on the menu in places like this?" McCoy asks, his thoughts returning to the tea. "It seems like it would clear up a lot of misunderstandings if they didn't."

"It is so the other partner can refuse the proposal if they wish." Spock lets out a small sniff that sounds suspiciously like a laugh. "Insulting the tea instead is an unorthodox method. How did you have the spice tea, when you had it before? How was it prepared?"

McCoy frowns, trying to remember. It was quite a long time ago. "I had it iced, I know that much. It was hot as hell that day."

Understanding finally crinkles around Spock's eyes. "Ah. That would explain your distaste for it, then. Spice tea is never prepared iced, Leonard—the workers at that tea shop likely did not know how to ice it properly for you."

"That would explain why it tasted so bland," McCoy mutters thoughtfully, shaking his head. "Poor Savel. I hope I didn't hurt them too badly."

Spock noses at his cheek reverently. "They should not have given up so easily."

"You're one to talk," McCoy snorts, rolling his eyes. He turns his head to kiss Spock on the lips again. "Well, k'diwa, I think we should go have some spice tea. *Properly*, this time."

The corner of Spock's mouth crumples into a small smile as he returns the kiss. "Agreed."

★✚★✚★

Vulcan

The grooms are late for their own reception.

If Sarek was human, he may have been quite irritated by this fact. Spock had not given him and Amanda much notice that he and Leonard were getting married, so they had rushed to plan the ceremony, invite the appropriate elders and guests, and prepare the traditional venue. The ceremony had been Vulcan, so it was completed successfully without any significant issues, but Sarek's now son-in-law had requested a human-style reception afterward. Sarek had left planning that segment in Amanda's capable hands, but she had also informed him very close to the time of the ceremony that, as one of the groom's fathers, it was customary for him to make a speech. Sarek had agonized over his speech for many hours before producing something that he believes both grooms will appreciate.

If he can ever deliver it to them. He's been waiting to give his speech for thirty-six point seven minutes.

Amanda discreetly checks the time on her holowatch and then looks out at the increasingly restless crowd. "… Perhaps we should look for our sons, my husband."

"Logical, my wife," Sarek says, and holds his arm out to her.

They don't have to look far—as soon as they step out into the hallway, they can see Spock and McCoy having an argument at the other end of the hall. Sarek can hear them as well, though he doesn't understand why they're having a disagreement over cooling systems.

"Leonard, as I have mentioned before, this building was built specifically to dissipate heat," Spock is saying, rather impatiently, to Sarek's surprise. "As such, there is no need for additional cooling systems which are detrimental to the surrounding environment, as well as extremely expensive."

McCoy grits his teeth. "Spock, this building may be designed to keep *Vulcans* cool, but most of our guests are humans! We've already had some people passing out from heat exhaustion!"

Sarek raises his eyebrows. This is true, though he suspects it's mostly because of how long the guests have been waiting for the grooms.

"And I certainly will when I get on the dance floor," McCoy continues grumpily, crossing his arms.

"You do not need to dance," Spock points out, logically.

"Yes I do!" McCoy throws his arms up in the air. "It's tradition in my family, and you agreed that we'd follow both of our families' traditions!"

"Even at the expense of our guests' health, and yours as well?"

"The only one putting our guests' health at risk is *you*!" McCoy snarls.

Amanda shakes her head with a wry smile on her face. "Oh dear. So this is what they've been doing all this time?"

"Doctor M'Benga is already hard at work distributing water and electrolytes, as well as ice packs," Spock says, his voice completely flat. "I am merely saying that we do not need to install an entire air conditioning system. Especially since it is entirely illogical to do so now."

"If you'd done it *before*, like I'd asked—!"

"I have taken the necessary heat-related precautions, as you asked. If you find my work unsatisfactory, then you should find your own solution." With that, Spock turns and speeds off down the hall.

"Unbelievable!" McCoy grumbles.

"Leonard, is everything alright?" Amanda asks as she and Sarek approach him.

McCoy turns, surprise clear on his face. He greets them in the traditional Vulcan way of one addressing their parents-in-law, and then says sheepishly, "Did you catch all that?"

"Yes," Sarek says. "Though I fail to understand how an argument about cooling systems would benefit the guests who have been waiting thirty-eight point two minutes for the two of you to arrive."

McCoy's mouth drops open, a blush darkening his cheeks. "… Has it really been that long?"

"Unfortunately," Amanda says gently. "Will the two of you be alright to continue?"

"Of course." McCoy looks at her strangely. "Why wouldn't we be?"

Amanda's bafflement floats over the bond to Sarek. He sends her a brief stream of amusement back. "You've been arguing about cooling systems for the better part of an hour …"

"Oh, that happens all the time," McCoy says, flapping his hand. He is completely unconcerned. "Well, not the part about the air conditioning, but yeah."

"And you are quite certain that you wished to marry my son?" Sarek asks doubtfully.

"Absolutely—one hundred percent," McCoy says, his adoration clear in his voice. He turns, looking down the hall where Spock had just left. "I just need to finish giving him a piece of my mind, and then we'll come greet the guests. Give me twenty minutes, tops!"

He runs off—Sarek and Amanda watch him go. Amanda leans into her husband, amused. "Perhaps you didn't need to write a speech after all."

Sarek nods. "We will be fortunate if anyone is left to hear it by the time they return."

Amanda laughs softly. "They remind me of us, when we were younger."

"Indeed." Sarek touches her face reverently. "Our son has chosen well."

"I think so too," Amanda says. "I just hope everyone will survive the reception."

Amused, they return to the banquet hall, and do their best to keep the guests alive in time for the grooms' eventual return.

Come on, just because you hatched in a desert, don't mean you'll dissolve in water

Hold Tight for Heartbreak

by fangirlandiknowit

Post-Beyond, AOS. McCoy ends up spending shore leave together with Spock, and it's surprisingly easy. Until it isn't.

The vastness of space was such that McCoy only contemplated it when he wanted to feel small and insignificant in comparison to the universe.

The observation deck was perfect for this. He spent most of his time on board the *Enterprise* trying his best to avoid looking out, and the observation deck had uncannily large viewscreens. In warp, the stars were blurred, giving off the strange impression of being underwater, deep enough that all living things had developed ways to glow in the dark. It made him vaguely nauseated if he looked at it too long, but it was a welcome respite from the less easily cured nausea haunting him the past few days.

He was always on Jim's case about the dangers of stress, but there really was no cure to plain old sadness.

He sat, elbows digging into his thighs, gaze stuck on the stars littering the known universe. So many of them, and only one of him. Life was a precious thing, but it could be so hard to deal with. The curse of sentient beings everywhere—the ability to think and feel and despair.

His back was starting to ache, his thighs tingling from where his elbows cut off the blood flow. Still, his brain was showing no signs of cutting him some slack despite the late hour .. They were headed somewhere familiar, somewhere good, somewhere home.

He wished he could stay on the ship. He wished the admiralty had shown some of their usual callousness and pulled him into work. He wished for anything but the loneliness awaiting him back on Earth.

The faint sound of the door sliding open told him he should straighten up, put on a smile.

The crew shouldn't see their doctor so depressed. Doctors weren't allowed to be depressed, or sick, or anything short of miracle workers. He only hoped it wasn't Jim.

"Doctor."

Just Spock, then. He could deal with that.

"Feel free to ignore me," he muttered, wincing as he allowed his body to relax from its unforgiving pose.

The low couch stretching along the viewscreen offered little in ways of support for his back, and he rubbed at the ache in his neck as Spock settled beside him. He wondered what made the Vulcan seek out the lounge in the middle of gamma shift, then decided he didn't care. Spock had his own troubles of mind, and if anyone deserved to brood about life it was him.

For a while they merely sat together in silence, each to his own thoughts. Then Spock turned to him, hands clasped in his lap and expression subdued.

"We are seven–point–two hours away from Earth at our current speed," he said. "I had thought you would be looking forward to seeing your daughter again."

McCoy didn't move. He held his breath, fought down the burning lump in his throat. He thought of earlier that day on the bridge, McCoy visiting for lack of something better to do, and Jim spreading an easy happiness around as he chatted about their shore leave plans.

"As I recall, you avoided answering Jim's question as to your planned activities during the leave, instead deflecting the question back to him with some innuendo. May I presume, then, that your plans with Joanna have been canceled?"

"God, I hate when you're perceptive, Spock. Can't you just let me be miserable in peace?"

"I surmise that means you have not informed Jim."

McCoy buried his face in his hands, rubbing his fingertips into tense muscle as he exhaled heavily.

"Why are you here, Spock?" he asked, too tired to deal with him now.

There was a pause, which for a human would have indicated hesitation but for Spock could mean just about anything.

"For the same reason as you, Doctor. I wished to have a moment of thought before arrival."

McCoy looked at him then, his own irritation met with calm. Behind that calm hid something else, though.

"Wait," McCoy said. "Did you and Uhura break up? Again?"

Spock inclined his head. There was an unhappy tension at the corner of his mouth, his eyes shifting away to take in the stars again.

"I'd offer you some advice, but I'd rather not have you attempt to return the favor," he muttered, watching Spock's profile in the dim light.

"Perhaps you should tell Jim," Spock said, only because they both knew that was *exactly* the sort of advice he would have returned, and because now McCoy would be forced to offer his own.

Wiping at his mouth, McCoy glared at the other man. He was supposed to soak in misery alone, and Spock was ruining the whole set-up.

"Do you have *any* idea what sort of hoops and hurdles Jim had to go through to get us shore leave on Earth? He was damned proud of himself for giving me some time with my

daughter. It's not his fault—"

His voice caught, and he cut himself off. It wasn't Jim's fault that Joanna had canceled. She was busy with school, and her friends, and she deserved better than her absent father coming back once in a blue moon demanding she spend her time with him.

"I believe," Spock said quietly, "that many of the human crew are grateful for the return to their home planet. It has been a rare occurrence during our five-year mission."

McCoy didn't know what to say. Was Spock telling him to stop whining, or was he offering the comfort that Jim's struggle was appreciated by many others and thus not wasted?

"I just don't want him pitying me," he settled for. "And I know if I tell him he'll cancel his own plans to keep me company, and I can't let him do that. He finally gets to spend some time with his mom and brother, I don't want to intrude."

"I understand."

After Yorktown, they'd all thought twice about the people they'd left back home. McCoy might not have much left, but what he had was precious to him.

"I'll go see my mother for a day or two," he said, running a hand through his hair as he sighed. "But I know if I try longer than that she'll drive me crazy. Two weeks is a long time when you have nothing to do and no one to do it with."

"A similar situation to the one I have with my father," Spock noted drily. "He is currently on Earth, and has invited me to dinner. It will likely be ..."

"Awkward?"

"Presumably, yes."

"You should have broken up after shore leave."

Raising an eyebrow, Spock turned from the view to direct it at McCoy.

"On the contrary, Nyota was adamant we separate before the leave. She did not want to pretend to enjoy it."

"Damn."

"I have not had time to make other arrangements."

"That's harsh, Spock. You think it's permanent this time?"

"Unclear."

McCoy watched him for a long moment, then cleared his throat. He angled his body towards Spock, their knees almost brushing.

"Look," he said. "There's only so many times you can break up and get back together before it becomes pathetic. Are you just letting her decide when she does and doesn't want you? Don't you think you should have an honest conversation about whether or not this is healthy?"

There was only resignation in Spock's brown eyes.

"Is that your advice then, Doctor?"

"It's my friendly concern, that's what it is. My advice is to stop getting back together since it's obviously not working out in the long run."

"I see."

He spent a few more seconds scrutinizing Spock, then stood with a low groan and braved the distance between the couch and the viewscreen. Up close, his brain started wondering if there really was firm plastisteel between his body and the darkness outside, and he shuddered as he kept his feet firmly planted on the floor.

"It seems illogical to stand so close when the effects appear negative to your wellbeing, Doctor."

"Takes my mind off things," he grunted back.

To his surprise, Spock came and joined him. Together they watched the ship make its steady way towards home, each dreading the arrival.

"You're not staying on the ship, are you?" McCoy asked eventually, when the vertigo was becoming too much.

"The maintenance crew will oversee the updates. Even should I attempt to stay, recycling the air will force the ship to be evacuated for twenty hours."

It occurred to him that they were both equally alone in the face of shore leave. There were probably hospitals he could visit, research he could catch up on ... But McCoy wasn't too keen on work right now. Work was the reason his daughter found him a waste of time. It was all he was good at, but he didn't feel very good right now.

"Got anything on your bucket list, then?"

Spock opened his mouth, then closed it again. His lips thinned into disapproval before he decided to speak.

"I have heard the expression. I do not have a bucket list."

"Surely you've got places you want to see, things you'd like to do?" McCoy needled him, touching the screen in front of him to reassure himself it was really there.

"Do you?"

He thought about it.

"Well, there's the usual tourist spots ..."

What he really wanted to do was take his daughter wherever she liked to go. She was almost a teenager now, opinionated. Even Jocelyn had apologized that she canceled so abruptly.

"I think I'd like to go somewhere quiet, maybe. With no people. Walk around nature. Fresh air. That sort of thing."

He tapped his fingertips on the see-through wall, tracing the colorful shape of a nebula as they passed it. It was blurred, too, and Spock could probably tell him its name and exact composition.

"I might consider something similar," Spock said.

They did not speak more on the subject.

★✚★✚★

On his second day in his childhood home, McCoy awoke to the gnawing sense of having disappointed his mother, and to a comm message from Spock:

I have acquired a suitably remote location. You are welcome to share it, should you wish. Notify me if you agree to join me; I will arrive tomorrow at 1300 hours local time.

Attached was a shuttle port address in Texas. *Texas!* McCoy thought. Hardly remote. But near enough to Georgia that the shuttle ride wouldn't take too long. He considered the message, rubbing sleep from his eyes. Spending shore leave with Spock seemed ridiculous, but there must have been a logical reason for Spock to contact him. Maybe Vulcans got lonely, too. And it's not like they could ask anyone else on the ship, or as if they had any friends to invite.

Below, he could hear the soft noises of his mother bustling around the kitchen, no doubt starting up a pot of coffee and wondering why he was sleeping in. It was barely seven in the morning.

Before he could overthink it, he quickly sent a message of acceptance, and booked a shuttle. He'd have to do a transfer, but at least Spock wouldn't have to wait for him.

When he made his way down the stairs to greet his mother he felt strangely lighter at heart.

★✚★✚★

The shuttle port was the opposite of busy. The transfer had gotten him onto a ten-seater, and Spock had been on it, too. He refused to say where they were going, though, and why he'd brought so much luggage. McCoy wasn't really prepared for anything aside from an easy, light vacation with full accommodations, and his mood became more and more filled with trepidation as the hover car Spock had rented took them further and further into what could only be described as wilderness.

"Spock," he pleaded after they had driven the better part of an hour. "Are we going to recreate an away mission or what?"

There was a hint of a smile playing on Spock's lips, and it only served to make McCoy more worried.

"You expressed an interest in nature and isolation, Doctor. The Big Bend National Park is one destination I had not previously considered visiting but found interesting upon investigation. While accessible, its 1251.8 square miles of land is not so visited as to appear crowded. "

McCoy groaned, throwing his head back against the headrest.

"So we're going camping? To study the Texan wildlife?"

"There is also very little light pollution, allowing for stargazing. However, the variety in plant and animal life as well as the fossil sites should prove fascinating."

"Dear lord," McCoy sighed, unable to help a smile. "You just want someone to hold the tricorder on your little science trip."

"Perhaps I may bribe you with a visit to the hot springs."

McCoy raised an eyebrow, stretching his legs out in the car. Spock looked positively excited, and it was sort of contagious.

"Resorting to kidnapping and bribery, what will Starfleet think of you? I just hope it isn't as hot as Satan's ass out there."

"The temperature should be manageable."

"And what about you, are you going to be manageable, too?"

Spock spared him a look, deadpan and smug at the same time. People who believed Vulcans didn't feel emotion had never met Spock, that was for sure.

They spent that evening in a small hotel, and headed out bright and early the next morning. There were all sorts of things to do, and Spock had planned a careful itinerary that McCoy had nothing to say about. *Let Spock do the work*, he thought. He'd just tag along and grumble about the heat.

As it turned out, the heat was manageable after all. McCoy soon found himself invested

as they hiked trails, visited the fossil museum, and soaked in the hot springs. He couldn't even complain about the food. He did, however, complain about sleeping on the ground. It was hardly comfortable, though Spock of course appeared entirely unaffected as McCoy stretched and grimaced each morning.

On their second to last night, Spock had driven them in the hover car to a spot that promised splendid stargazing. McCoy sat on a rock and gazed at the sunset, losing himself to its brilliant colors. In his hand was a cup of Vulcan spiced tea, and while the planet had perished, the tradition had survived, and the blend had been picked up on their last visit to New Vulcan.

Spock stood a ways off, contemplating a cluster of small cacti with a tricorder. Surely appreciating the view was illogical, McCoy thought fondly. The days alone had rubbed off a few hard edges between them, and while he wouldn't call them best friends he could acknowledge that things had steadily changed after Yorktown. What had been mutual respect and tentative friendship had morphed into something softer, something a little more tangible. It was the kind of friendship that made Jim smile, eyes crinkling, slapping both their backs as they finally agreed to disagree on the topic of the day.

Jim never believed him when he said Spock had made him allergic to logic.

Lost in thought, he didn't notice right away that Spock had straightened up and turned towards him.

"Doctor?"

McCoy sighed.

"Just wondering why that cactus could be so much more interesting than the sunset, is all," he said.

"I am aware of the scientific explanation behind sunsets," Spock said, walking over to him and letting the tricorder hang off one shoulder. "Plant life therefore holds more interest to me from a scientific viewpoint."

McCoy rolled his eyes. He patted the rock, though Spock merely came to stand beside him.

"It's a cactus," he drawled, setting the tea aside to lean back on his hands and squint up at the pink and gold sky.

"The Echinocereus coccineus—"

"Spock," he said firmly. "It's a cactus. Now sit down and watch the view with me."

Cocking an eyebrow, Spock did as told. Bit by bit the sun disappeared below the horizon, taking with it some of the warmth in the air. There were birds chirping in the distance, quieting down as evening fell. McCoy watched in wonder, just as he'd done the past nights, as the starry sky revealed itself. It was a perfectly clear night, and the Milky Way shone above them. There was something special about staring up at the stars from your own planet after visiting so many others. These were the stars he'd seen as a child, familiar and known. Unbidden, he sought out 40 Eridani A. Next to it, Spock's home world used to exist, now an empty, dark spot. He'd learnt to find it after the destruction of the planet—few people would have missed it, what with the shock and joint anguish.

Even though he'd been there when it happened, he sometimes still couldn't believe it. And what must it be like for Spock, he wondered. Homeless. Planet-less. A man of two worlds, cut off for the rest of his life from childhood, culture, identity. Sometimes, he caught

Jim thinking about it. What they could have done differently. Who they might have saved. What sort of measures could be taken to keep other worlds intact. And with Krall and his terrifying weapon, those thoughts had once again surfaced. Even though Jim saved so many people. Even though the galaxy was saved. Even so, guilt gnawed at him, and it gnawed at McCoy, too. He was glad he'd brought Jim onto the *Enterprise* to aid Vulcan. Less glad he hadn't noticed Jim's depressive episode.

For now, both Jim and Spock remained on the *Enterprise*. But for how long? The five-year mission was coming to an end. McCoy, for his part, didn't have much of a life to return to. And if he stayed on Earth, he'd be left wondering. Who might he help, if he continued traveling among the stars? What wonders might he see, what diseases might he cure, what good might he do?

Shore leave wasn't good for him. It got him maudlin, overthinking and worrying. It stressed him to not be working. As lovely as the park had been, he was starting to become like Jim—restless, when he wasn't going somewhere. There were probably things one could put down in his file, consider in his psychological evaluations. Aviophobia, workaholic, failure of a father and husband, over-emotional and afraid of transporters. There were things wrong with him, alright, but for all that Starfleet had seemed a last-ditch attempt to get his life back in order, he now wondered if he'd manage to live without it.

The stars winked at him, offering no solutions. And he didn't really have a problem to solve, not yet. Not until the mission ended. Not until he knew what Jim would do. What his options were.

"Spock," he asked, startling even himself as he broke the silence. "What are you going to do afterwards? When our five years are up?"

He could see Spock's profile in the starlight, the moon hanging full and low somewhere behind them. He appeared unmoving, a statue more than a man.

"Actually, never mind," he added in a hurry, letting out a short little laugh. "I'm just letting all this fresh air and open sky get to me. And I'm sure you look forward to joining your father and the others on New Vulcan without anyone accusing you of ditching them."

Spock tensed. McCoy snapped his mouth shut with unease, crossing his arms and forcing his eyes away from the Vulcan. Those hunched shoulders told McCoy all he needed to know about hitting the jackpot on topics that were off limits. There came no quick denial that Vulcans don't look forward to things, nor did Spock offer anything other than an awkward silence that before McCoy opened his big mouth had felt companionable.

"Sorry," he muttered, when the silence stretched out too long. "Should have kept my mouth shut."

"I have not made any such decisions, Leonard."

Spock's voice was soft, quiet. The use of McCoy's given name made something crawl up his spine, telling him to get up and put as much distance between them as he could.

"I find myself as torn as I was on Altamid. Perhaps this is why Nyota found our relationship strained."

McCoy let out a slow exhale.

"She wanted to know the same thing, huh?"

"In essence."

He nodded, fingers digging into his arms. McCoy should go back to Atlanta, see if he

had a chance at repairing things with Joanna. Starfleet tended to forcefully ground you after longer assignments, unless you could show good reason for being let back up into the dark right away.

"I can't really picture you having a horde of kids anyway," McCoy said. "Or would you just donate? I know they've been experimenting with incubation chambers to speed up the repopulation."

He was babbling now, and not just that—he was babbling about the worst possible thing to mention to Spock.

"I read some of the research. Interesting stuff. We don't really have any equivalent species to compare it to, though you'd think the universe was big enough that something might have come up ..."

"Leonard," Spock said, tone clipped. "As I am half-human, my genome is hardly interesting to my species. The children would not be my own."

McCoy blinked.

"Oh."

"Nyota is furthermore not interested in having children of her own, and so the consideration is irrelevant regardless."

"Yeah. Okay." He paused, licked his lips. "What about you, then? Would you want kids?"

This time, the silence was deafening. The sky above them seemed endless, uncaring that McCoy was digging himself a metaphorical grave with each word falling from his mouth. Shore leave wasn't just dangerous. It made him cross boundaries he hadn't even thought about, apparently.

Still, he didn't take the question back. He waited with bated breath, fingertips tingling and toes curling in his shoes.

"I do not know," Spock whispered. "It seems a far-fetched idea, considering the facts."

"But you'd help out with the kids on New Vulcan."

"Serving as a teacher or in some other role would merely be performing my duties."

McCoy uncrossed his arms, folding his hands between his thighs instead, pressing his palms together to keep them from ... he didn't know what from. He only knew they twitched with the need to reach out, and he couldn't let them.

"Kids aren't easy," he muttered. "And if you don't have any, you at least can't fuck things up."

"That was not my concern."

McCoy shrugged.

"For the record, I'm sure you'd manage, if you wanted. But you have to want it, I think. Don't just make babies for the sake of your species."

"As I said," Spock replied drily, "they would not be interested in aiding me in such an endeavor. And I may not wish to subject a child or a mate to the same procedures I was subjected to in order to be conceived."

At this, McCoy glanced at him. He didn't look upset at least, which was a relief. You never knew with Spock. The smallest thing might hit the hardest.

"Sometimes," he said, "parents will endure any hardships in order to have kids. Joanna was more of an accident."

Spock's expression softened.

"I am sorry you were unable to visit her, Leonard."

Swallowing down the lump in his throat, McCoy half shrugged with one shoulder. He wasn't going to force it if she said no. He dreaded being one of those parents forced upon the child, to make her see him only for his own peace of mind and not because she got anything out of it. At least Jocelyn was a good mother, if perhaps not a very gracious wife. Though he was probably to blame for that, too.

"I haven't been a very good dad to her."

It sounded like a confession. It felt like a confession.

"I'm not ..." He trailed off, grimacing. What was he doing, pouring his heart out to Spock of all people? "The only thing I manage not to fuck up is being a doctor, and even that is only for the most part. I'm not really good for anything else."

"I believe Jim would disagree."

"Jim's not here."

There was a furrow between Spock's brows, deepening as he considered McCoy. Spock loved picking on him, and on a normal day that was fine. They picked on each other. Challenged each other, maybe. Argued things out when Jim's role as captain forced him to keep quiet on certain things. Kept the boredom of easy space travel at bay by bumping elbows in the labs, sniffing at each other's research and mercilessly editing each other's papers.

Spock found his spelling atrocious. McCoy kept trying to knock it into Spock's head that insults were illogical no matter how veiled and hid behind logic they were when replying to badly written disagreements on those papers (unless the replies themselves were insulting, in which case he happily aided Spock in tearing someone to figurative shreds). Sometimes McCoy was the one who wrote the badly written and insulting replies to Spock's papers. Just to keep him on his toes. Either way, they were used to sniping at each other when circumstances allowed. Disagreement came as natural as breathing. And yet, Spock looked at him now as if he knew the very depths of McCoy's soul.

"Then I will not embarrass you by attempting to convince you of your own worth in his stead, Leonard."

Maybe if Spock stopped saying his name like that he wouldn't be embarrassed. As it was, he felt his cheeks heat up despite his attempts at keeping a level head.

"Thanks," he forced out, lifting a hand to rub at the back of his neck.

"I also wish to inform you that I have considered what you said on the observation deck."

Frowning, McCoy looked up at him.

"What was that?"

"When you suggested not to resume my relationship with Nyota. I found no opportune moment to do so, but as we are already discussing some difficult topics I believe the moment is as opportune as it may get."

"Right." He bit at his lower lip, forcing his shoulders down. "I know I suggested it, but I'm still sorry, Spock. You've been together a long time."

Spock tilted his head down in a nod, then slowly lifted his face towards the sky.

"It is not a decision made lightly. However, there is no logic in resuming something that will inevitably end soon. Our futures are not compatible."

McCoy reluctantly tore his eyes away from Spock. The sky seemed even brighter now, alive with stardust. It was going to take some time getting used to, he thought. Spock and

Uhura seemed a constant on board the ship, despite their breaks. If even they fell apart as the mission end approached ... he bit into his cheek, grabbing for the tea again just to keep his mind off such thoughts. There was no use worrying about things that hadn't happened yet, even if it was one of his specialties.

"What of you, Doctor? Have you decided how to spend your time between missions?"

McCoy rolled his eyes, then took a sip of tea to stall for time.

"There's nothing confirmed about a second mission, unless you know something Jim doesn't?"

"I do not. However, it seems logical."

"To you, maybe," he muttered under his breath.

Unfortunately for him, Spock waited patiently for an answer. He turned the mug in his hands, feeling the ghost of leftover warmth against his skin. It was decent when lukewarm, too, but his mouth felt too dry to swallow it down.

"I don't know," he sighed. "I really don't know." He could feel Spock watching him, no doubt curious. "Another five years in space ..."

"Jim would surely ask you to join."

As if on cue, McCcoy's hand came up to touch the necklace around his neck. Jim had gifted it to him when they returned from Altamid. *Something to track you with*, he'd joked, referring to the vokaya stone Uhura wore. McCoy wasn't sure it wasn't just some cheap trinket Jim had found in a back alley somewhere on that god awful snow globe in space. Still, he'd found himself reluctant to take it off. It wasn't really in the way under his uniform, and Jim had gotten into the habit of checking it was there.

Deep down he knew Jim feared being separated again, unable to find either him or Spock. Convincing Spock to put on jewelry seemed a moot point. But McCoy was apparently fair game, and he'd even learnt to sleep with the damn thing on.

With the low neckline of his t-shirt, the silver with a gray gemstone was easy to close his fingers around.

"Leonard," Spock said, sounding serious enough that it startled McCoy.

He snapped his hand down, turning towards him.

"I have spent some of our time here considering the future."

"Uh-huh?"

"My conclusion is the need for honesty."

McCoy blinked at him, brows furrowing into a frown. Spock looked determined, hands clasped over his knees and leaning in a bit towards him, waiting until he was sure he had McCoy's full attention. His neck started to prickle with nerves, wondering what Spock could possibly need to be honest about. Confessions from a Vulcan were rarely good news.

"I thought Vulcans were always honest," he said, licking his lips.

Spock did not so much as twitch.

"I am attracted to you, Leonard, and—"

McCoy flew up from the rock, spilling most of what was left of his tea over the hand holding it. He gaped at Spock, feeling the color drain from his cheeks.

"I'm gonna have to stop you right there," he said, telling himself his voice didn't shake. "No honesty needed. I say we go back to staring at the stars in silence, and tomorrow we get back to San Francisco and meet up with Jim and I'll pretend I never heard you start a

sentence like that in my entire life."

Spock stood as well. Slowly, deliberately. He closed the distance as one approaches a spooked animal, then plucked McCoy's mug out of his hands and placed it down on the rock beside them. McCoy wiped the soaked hand off almost absentmindedly, transferring the errant liquid onto his shirt. His lungs struggled for air, and his heart threatened to escape through his mouth, pounding in his throat and jaw and temples.

"If you will let me finish," Spock said, concise and precise and all those other adjectives that worked for Vulcans when they talked. "That is all I ask."

McCoy didn't want him to ask. He wanted, *needed* him, to be quiet.

"I don't think you should," he whispered, losing his nerve and his mind and Spock was looking at him all of a sudden as if he knew how McCoy felt and he couldn't know that.

He couldn't possibly know, not when even Jim didn't, and Jim knew pretty much everything else there was to know. Again, his fingers sought out the necklace, closing his fist around it as if contemplating to tear it off. Spock's gaze fell onto his hand, and something switched in his expression. It became less intense, more guarded. Like McCoy had already given his answer.

"I see," Spock said quietly. "I was mistaken. Jim assured me the two of you were not romantically involved, but my initial assessment that you are wearing a token of his affection was accurate after all."

"What?"

It was all he could manage to force out. Words failed him as Spock took a step back. Unbidden, the hand left his neck and reached out, an aborted motion that made him swallow down a curse. He wanted Spock to take a step back. But he couldn't let him do so because of a lie.

"We're not," he said, sucking in a breath. "It's platonic. I mean it. We'd have told you."

Spock eyed him for a long moment, dark eyes reflecting starlight as they searched his face. Close enough to touch, but he wouldn't touch. Couldn't. He crossed his arms instead, tensing up. He was fucking things up already, just further proof he'd been right to keep his feelings hidden, pushing them away into a deep corner of his mind where even he couldn't see them. A slow ache spread through his chest, clogging up his throat. He and Jim weren't ... He'd thought about it. But it wasn't really for them. Not like that, at least. In all other ways he stood by Jim's side, and the only reason he hadn't decided his immediate future yet was because he was waiting for Jim to decide first.

"You do not seem pleased by my attempt to convey my affection for you," Spock said eventually.

Something in his brain seemed to short-circuit at that.

"Is that—" He paused to let out a slow, shaky breath, wetting his dry lips. "Is that *not* platonic affection, is what you're saying?"

"Indeed. As the end of our mission approaches and my relationship with Nyota has come to a permanent conclusion, I wished to inquire whether you would be interested in exploring our mutual attraction."

"*Mutual*," he spluttered, coughing into a fist. "Who said it's mutual?"

Spock gave him a look that could rival Uhura's, the one she'd give you when you were being particularly obstinate and uncooperative. McCoy did not like it.

"You're making assumptions," he added when Spock didn't relent.

"Perhaps." Spock took a step closer again, then another. "However, I estimate the likelihood of your reciprocal feelings to be eighty—"

McCoy let out a wounded noise, turning his back on Spock. How dare he? How *dare* he?! Quantifying the painful squeeze in his chest every time he saw them kiss, reducing his longing down to predictions, mocking the empty space in his bed with percentage!

"Shut up," he said, hugging himself tightly. "I don't care about your blasted numbers. Predict the likelihood of me kicking your ass if you say another word!"

Spock's newfound hesitation was palpable, even with his back turned towards him. *Good*, he thought, clenching his jaw. To his chagrin, a hand landed on his forearm, a gentle grip that held him in place as Spock walked around to face him again.

"Leonard, please," he said.

It wasn't fair when Spock opened up like this. When he permitted himself to be human, to be vulnerable. A rare sight, and one McCoy desperately wanted to erase from his view.

"No."

The word sounded wet. Trembling. Too close to spilling secrets and baring his heart.

One more step, and they were almost chest to chest. McCoy averted his eyes stubbornly, finding that damn cactus. The outline of it was visible in the darkness of night, arms spread every which way and offering no help whatsoever. He'd wanted Spock to sit with him. Had he been too obvious? Perhaps this whole week had been an exercise in measuring his potential interest. The good-natured ribbing as they wandered through the rocky landscape. The hidden smiles as Spock became engrossed in hunting down the insect life. Guessing bird song and getting it wrong. And, of course, the hot springs where McCoy had taken such care not to look that it might as well have had the opposite effect.

The problem was that McCoy *wanted*, but he didn't know how to keep things if he ever got them. And how could he, when their time together was running out? If Spock and Uhura had no future, how could he and Spock possibly have one?

"It has to be no, Spock," he added, when Spock merely stayed close, hand on his arm.

"If that is your final answer, I will of course respect it."

He made the mistake to look up, then, dragging his eyes from the shape of the cactus to the shape of Spock's face instead. Too near, breaths mingling, dark eyes searching his for the truth. Honesty seemed a far-fetched idea. He couldn't explain. Wouldn't know where to even begin.

"Leonard, are you truly not amenable to—"

He slapped a hand over Spock's mouth. They both looked equally startled by it, the warmth of Spock's lips burning into his palm.

"Don't talk. Don't say anything."

If he sounded slightly hysterical, he thought it was well within his rights. The intensity of Spock's gaze deepened, and with a sense of growing horror, McCoy remembered about the touch telepathy. His hand dropped, but Spock's hold on him kept him in place. Heart pounding in his chest, he felt his lips part and his lungs run out of air as Spock cupped his cheek and pulled him in for a kiss.

It hurt, in the way that too much pleasure can tilt over into pain. His brain turned fuzzy, too focused on the softness of Spock's mouth against his, the feel and taste of it, all that *want* pouring out of him as Spock kissed him.

They needed to stop before he became addicted.

He lifted his hands to push away, but only managed to curl his fists into Spock's shirt. He felt weak to desire, succumbing to it, opening up for Spock's questioning tongue and the hand combing through his hair.

God, it was good. Too good. Too *easy*. A snatched moment in time he'd never be able to forget, and surely future him would *want* to forget when it all crashed and burned around them. He could see an endless stretch of arguing unfolding before him, of trying and failing and wanting and needing and *never* being enough.

He couldn't put them through it.

With a gasp he broke free, holding Spock at arm's length and breathing hard.

"You're being unfair," he said, trying desperately to gather his wits. "Just because I might enjoy it doesn't mean I actually want to—"

He cut off, struggling not to pull Spock back in. He did want to. And Spock could tell, damn him. But he didn't make a second attempt, and for that he was grateful.

"If not now," Spock asked, "perhaps I may ask again at the end of the mission?"

"I'd rather you didn't," McCoy muttered, but it wasn't a no.

Spock seemed to understand as much.

"While I find it illogical to wait until we may have already made conflicting plans for the future, I will not mention it until then."

"I don't have any grand plans, I'm just going wherever Jim is going."

Was that a flash of jealousy in Spock's eyes? Irritation, surely. But at least McCoy had put it out there, to make sure Spock didn't think he'd be waiting for him or anything of the sort.

"Understood." Spock paused, then moved slightly, retrieving something from a pocket. "I had hoped for a different answer, but I still wish to present you with this token of my affection. Platonically, if you allow it."

He held up his hand between them, in the gap between McCoy's arms where he still held onto Spock. Something glimmered in his palm, and McCoy's throat dried up.

A necklace.

"Is that—?"

"I was able to procure another vokaya stone." Spock's voice had gone quiet, soft. "It would honor me greatly if you accepted it.

McCoy swallowed, feeling his chest swell with unbidden emotion. How could he say no? How could he say *yes*?

He already wore a platonic necklace. It wouldn't make sense to refuse Spock's. It wouldn't feel *right*, was the problem, and holding his breath he gave a quick nod, allowing Spock close again as he lifted the necklace and placed it around McCoy's neck. Spock's fingers brushed his skin as they snapped the clasp shut, and the necklace made a soft, metallic noise as it fell into place beside Jim's.

Spock watched him, hands lingering, and the allure of another kiss was suddenly too much for him.

McCoy was the one who had to let go and step away. Once he'd started, he found himself putting some distance between them, just enough that Spock would be forced to call out if he wanted to be heard.

The stars were in the same position he'd left them. Only McCoy seemed to have changed. Like someone had dug deep and forced part of him to turn inside out. Slowly, as if afraid it would bite, he sought out the new necklace. It was shaped like thin wires wound around the stone, unobtrusive, and yet it felt so heavy against his chest.

I'm not ready, he thought, helplessly. *I'm sorry, Spock.*

The stars did not reply, and Spock did not call out for him.

In his hand, the metal warmed.

★✚★✚★

Risan Holiday

by Rusoe

In a universe where Spock is not the First Officer of the Enterprise, McCoy is taking shore leave on Risa when he stumbles across a drunk Vulcan. (A Spones Roman Holiday AU.)

Risa. Renowned across the galaxy as a planet of pleasures. Beautiful. Sensual. Dull.

Well. That's how Leonard McCoy, CMO of the USS *Enterprise* is beginning to feel, sitting in one of Risa's crowded bars and nursing a drink by himself.

Jim's voice is in the back of his head, chastising him for being such a stick-in-the-mud. But, in his defense, Jim had originally promised to spend the shore leave with him before canceling all their plans last minute and leaving him to take the shuttle down on his own.

"Sorry, Bones," Jim had said, an apologetic smile on his face. "The Crown Prince of Vulcan happens to be visiting Risa on a diplomatic tour of this sector's planets, and the brass wants me to go pay him respects on behalf of the fleet."

McCoy had frowned and crossed his arms, disappointment and worry curling together in his gut. "When's the last time you've been able to take shore leave? Can't you just tell them to stick it?"

"No rest for the wicked. I wish I could, but they're firm about this one. Don't worry about me though, next chance for shore leave we get, I promise you I'll be first on the roster."

So, now here McCoy was, stuck drinking alone in public and cursing his workaholic of a captain.

Across the bar, a gorgeous woman with sparkly purple hair and a minidress to match gives him a considering look. He smiles back for the sake of politeness, but his heart isn't in it, and he's secretly glad when her interest slides over to the tall Andorian sitting a few tables over. He's getting too old for random hookups on alien planets. Hell, even the pounding club music and sounds of people chatting all around him are starting to grate on his nerves.

It was probably time to call it a night. He downs the rest of his glass, throws a credit chip

to the bartender, and closes out his tab.

The bar is within walking distance of the beachfront villa he'd booked for the two nights of leave. His walk back along the shoreline gives him the chance to enjoy the gentle night breeze.

Above him, Risa's three moons hang full and bright in the dark tapestry of the night sky, illuminating his path with a silvery light. Together with the sweet scent of the wind and the soft rhythm of the waves against the glowing, warm sand, it's like a scene straight out of a holodeck program. Despite himself, McCoy's grievances melt away. Jim or no Jim, wasting away this chance at a real vacation would be a crying shame.

Vaguely, he remembers one of the ensigns excitedly mentioning that their shore leave was going to coincide with the Festival of the Moons. Maybe he'll go check it out tomorrow, he decides, humming slightly to himself as his spirits begin to rise.

He's just turned into the walkway leading up to the villa when he catches the alarming sight of two feet sticking out from behind a perfectly manicured bush.

His tricorder is out in an instant, rushing over to kneel by the body and scan it. It's a Vulcan, he realizes with some surprise. Male, around his age, and apparently, considering the mild tachycardia, hypoventilation, and heightened glucose levels, drunk off of his green-blooded ass.

He sighs in relief and pockets his tricorder, an amused grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. It seems even Vulcans weren't immune to Risa's delights.

"Hey you," he calls, tapping the Vulcan firmly on the shoulder. "You know, people who can't handle intoxicants shouldn't take so many."

Reacting to the stimulus, the Vulcan opens his eyes, blinking blearily up at McCoy. Under the silver light of the triple moons, the brown of his irises glow with a richness that has McCoy's breath catching in his throat.

"Illogical. Vulcans are not affected by alcohol," the Vulcan informs him, before promptly closing his eyes again.

"Sure, but I'm talking about sucrose not ... hey ... hey! Don't go back to sleep," McCoy grumbles, shaking the Vulcan again. "You'll catch a cold out here lying on the ground."

"No, thank you, Ambassador," the Vulcan mumbles, eyes still closed.

McCoy frowns. With how inebriated the man is, it's clear that he's not going to get through to him anytime soon. But he can't just leave him lying here like this, in danger of being stepped on or rolling over and suffocating himself in his own vomit.

Briefly, he tries to search the Vulcan for any identifying information that would give a clue as to where to take him, but he can't seem to find any pockets on the Vulcan's intricately embroidered robes, let alone a communicator.

Sighing, McCoy pulls the Vulcan into a sitting position, then hauls him up to teeter precariously on long, gangly legs. Thin as the Vulcan may be, he is deceptively heavy, the increased bone density no doubt adding to his weight. Combined with the fact that he's slightly taller than McCoy, McCoy has his hands full with hauling him down the walkway and up the porch steps leading to the door of the villa.

Miraculously, he manages not to drop him as he one-handedly fumbles the door open and half-stumbles the way to the guest bedroom.

"... Fascinating, quite fascinating," the Vulcan mutters, swaying slightly as McCoy leans

him up against a wall. His eyes flutter open, dazedly assessing his surroundings before focusing on the bed. "May I sleep here?"

"That's the general idea," McCoy says, one hand against the wall himself as he catches his breath.

The Vulcan takes a few shaky steps toward the bed, nearly toppling over before steadying himself against the headboard.

"It is acceptable," he declares, nodding, then pushes back upright and turns to face McCoy. "Will you help me get undressed?"

"Uh," McCoy says, his refusal sticking in his throat under the force of expectant, dark eyes. "... Okay."

He steps up to the Vulcan and examines his robes for any accessible fastenings. Spotting nothing other than the clasp at the Vulcan's neck, he tentatively reaches for it, unhooking the fine golden loop. The robe's collar falls open, revealing a swathe of unblemished, lightly green skin, and McCoy fails to keep his eyes from straying down, drawn by the glint of a gold chain to the hint of dark chest hair peeking out from below.

Suddenly conscious of how close they're standing, McCoy clears his dry throat and takes a hasty step back.

"There you are," he declares gruffly, clasping his hands behind his back and bouncing awkwardly on the balls of his feet. "You can handle the rest."

The Vulcan stares at him without a lick of comprehension, then looks down at himself, wobbling in a concerning manner. "Thank you. You have my permission to withdraw," he says, and, without any further warning, proceeds to tug the whole robe over his head and let it fall into a crumpled pile on the floor.

"... Thanks," McCoy says, face feeling a little warm as he averts his eyes from the Vulcan's bared chest. His ingrained sense of propriety urges him to retreat and give the Vulcan some privacy, but his concern over the way the Vulcan tilts gracelessly onto the bed makes him reluctant to leave him on his own.

Deciding to observe the Vulcan for a little longer, he pulls a bedsheet over the Vulcan's prone form and settles down in the armchair by the bedside. Just until he's confident that the Vulcan won't aspirate, he tells himself as the Vulcan's breaths even out in the slow rhythm of sleep. But, as he studies the Vulcan's face, unable to tear his eyes away from the interplay of moonlight and shadow dancing across the regal features, he fails to notice his own eyelids growing heavier and heavier. And before long, he isn't observing anything at all, his mind swirling with half-formed thoughts of silvery shadows and brown eyes as he joins his guest in peaceful slumber.

★✚★✚★

McCoy wakes slowly with an uncomfortable crick in his back and a terrible taste in his mouth. Disoriented from sleep, he blinks blearily at the sunlight streaming in through the windows, and covers his eyes with an arm.

"Good morning."

He shoots up in alarm, the unfamiliar voice jolting him wide awake. The memories of the night before all come flooding back when his eyes land on the stranger sitting in the guest

bed, looking more put together than any half-naked vagrant had any right to be. McCoy doesn't know whether to be more embarrassed about the dried track of drool he feels tracing down his cheek, or at the fact that he'd apparently fallen asleep at the Vulcan's bedside, head pillowed in his arms at the edge of the bed.

"Morning," he says, though it comes out more like "m'rng", his voice still rough from sleep. He clears his throat and tries again. "How're ya feelin'?"

The Vulcan regards him with an unreadable gaze. "I am physically well. However, would you tell me where I am?"

"Oh, this is my place—the one you were trying to take a nap outside," McCoy says, raising a pointed eyebrow.

"I see," the Vulcan replies in the same, bland, cool voice. "I presume you brought me here and I spent the night in this bed, with you."

"Uh, well," McCoy flounders, trying to look less flustered than he feels. "I don't know if I'd use those words exactly, but—from a certain angle, yes."

Realizing that they've still yet to introduce themselves, McCoy offers his hand to the Vulcan. "I'm McCoy, by the way, Leonard McCoy. What's your name?"

The Vulcan stares at his hand, but doesn't take it. "You may call me Spock," he says, raising a hand to make a gesture with his middle and ring fingers separated instead. "You brought me into your bed without knowing who I was?"

"That's not—" McCoy chokes, getting a little annoyed. "Look, I'm a doctor, dammit, and you were passed out on the ground, so I wasn't just gonna leave you there. I know this is Risa, but try not to get so carried away with having fun next time, wouldja?"

The Vulcan—Spock—raises a haughty eyebrow. "I am Vulcan. Vulcans do not 'have fun'."

McCoy snorts. "Sure you don't. That's why you got drunk off your green-blooded ass the moment you got off-planet like a freshman college student away from their parents for the first time."

"Perhaps that is typical behavior for humans. However, unlike your species, mine has long since learned to look beyond the temptation of baser natures to behave in accordance with logic. I do not expect you to understand," Spock says.

McCoy gapes at him. "I help you, and all you do is call me *illogical?* Why, of all the ungrateful bastards I have ever met, you take the cake—see if I ever lift a finger for your pointy-eared ass again!"

"I would expect nothing less. After all, I do not know you, and you do not know me," Spock replies.

"Well, thank god for small mercies," McCoy growls, crossing his arms. "You can see yourself to the door then, and don't let it hit you on the way out. No need to thank me, I'll just be happy to never see your face again."

Spock's eyebrows knit together and he opens his mouth, but before he can make another irritating remark, a loud ringing startles them both.

Scrambling for his communicator, McCoy pulls it out of his pocket and whips it open.

"*Hey, Bones ...!*" Jim's voice is far too chipper for this early in the morning. "*Want to go hit up the beach for a swim?*"

"Jim ...? Didn't you say you were busy?"

"*Yeah, well ... about that ... turns out His Highness was taken violently ill at three o'clock this*

morning with a high fever, and all his appointments for today were canceled. Figured that without me minding you, you'd be sitting around all alone being your curmudgeonly self instead of having fun, and I thought I'd give you a call. So, how about it?'

"Hey, watch it, who're you calling curmudgeonly?" McCoy hisses into the comm, retreating into the next room for some privacy. "I'll have you know, *Captain*, I am a grown adult perfectly capable of minding myself!"

"*Really?*' Jim's voice sounds irritatingly amused. "*Then what've you been up to since you took the shuttle down?*'

"Well, I—I met someone last night," McCoy blurts, the words tumbling out before he can stop to think about it. "And we've been having a grand old time together, so I promised to go sightseeing with him today. Sorry to hear your plans fell through, but I've already made new ones, so I'll have to see you tomorrow on the shuttle back."

"*Oh ...! Well, I can't say I'm not surprised, but I'm happy for you,*" Jim says, sounding so sincere that McCoy can't help but feel a slight twinge of guilt. "*Have fun, I'll see you tomorrow, alright?*'

"Yeah, you too," McCoy manages to say before Jim ends the call, leaving him staring blankly at the piece of metal in his hand and cursing his damn fool pride.

"You lied. You made me no such promise." Startled into nearly dropping his comm, McCoy whirls around to glare at the unwelcome figure standing in the guest room's doorway.

"Holy mother of—I thought I told you to get out! Didn't anyone ever teach you it's rude to eavesdrop?" McCoy snaps, tucking his comm back into his pocket. "Anyway, who said I was talking about you?"

"There was no time for you to have met and spent time with a person other than me in the manner that you described. Therefore, if you were not referring to me, then you were still lying, likely in an illogical attempt to satisfy your human attachment to your pride."

Spock's got him there, McCoy realizes, face now positively burning. All his protests against humans being called illogical, only to prove it with his own actions. Unless …

"Well, I didn't lie. Promises don't always have to be spoken aloud, do they? How do you know I didn't think it to myself?"

"I would say that it was unlikely, given that you just expressed a desire to 'never see my face again'."

"Don't let it get to your head, but I suppose I've had a change of heart. How do you feel about getting breakfast together?" McCoy grits out.

He could swear that a flash of surprise flickers across Spock's face, but then Spock clasps his hands behind his back and it's gone, replaced by something that looks almost … considering. "I would not be averse to it."

Too tired and hungry to question it, McCoy resigns himself to a long, and probably weird day. "Great, then get up and get dressed. We're going out."

★✚★✚★

Two steaming mugs of coffee and a plate of unsettlingly blue scrambled eggs with a side of toast later, McCoy is in a good enough mood to see the whole situation in a better light.

Annoying as Spock may be, he doesn't make for half-bad company. Sure, his abysmal manners may have rubbed McCoy the wrong way, but turning to more innocuous topics

over breakfast, McCoy found that he actually could be a fairly pleasant conversation partner, listening intently and responding thoughtfully in turn.

"So, what do you do?" McCoy asks after a brief debate about the biological differences between Terran chickens and the Risan equivalent that somehow became a discussion about the orbits of Risa's three moons. "Research in astrophysics?"

"Not quite. I study astrography at the Vulcan Science Academy. I came to Risa for a few days for … a cultural exchange event," Spock says.

"VSA, huh—you guys have people doing some really groundbreaking work in non-invasive surgical techniques don't you? I heard even the Vulcan royal family sends its members there—you're lucky you get to rub elbows with all those bigshots."

"Indeed. It was my father's wish that I attend."

"Your father, huh? He some sort of scientist too?"

"No," Spock says, pausing slightly. "He mostly specializes in … what you might call public relations."

"Oh," McCoy says, pulling an exaggerated grimace. "Bet that involves a lot of dressing up and making small talk with a bunch of stuffed shirts."

The corners of Spock's mouth twitch in what seems to be his equivalent of a smile. "Yes, I do not care for it."

"Does he?"

"I have never heard him state it in explicit terms."

McCoy shakes his head. "Then why doesn't he quit?"

"Those in his particular position are not supposed to quit except in the event of a health condition that hinders their ability to successfully continue," Spock says.

"Well, here's to his health then," McCoy says, raising his coffee mug.

"The proper Vulcan salutation would be 'live long and prosper'," Spock says, raising his hand in the same hand gesture he'd given McCoy earlier.

"Huh." McCoy raises his own hand and tries to mimic it, frowning as his fingers refuse to cooperate. "Live long and prosper?"

Spock does that funny almost-smile of his. "Precisely."

Getting the feeling he's being poked fun at, McCoy scoffs and drops his hand, changing the subject. "If you hadn't gone to the VSA like your dad wanted, what do you think you'd be doing now?"

Spock is silent for a while. "I do not think about it. Dwelling on irrelevant hypotheticals is illogical," he finally says.

McCoy narrows his eyes. "Hold up, it's not irrelevant if it's about your life. Call me an illogical human all you want, but I'm pretty sure going on a bender alone while you're supposed to be doing a cultural exchange on another planet doesn't just happen out of nowhere."

"I would remind you that you do not have enough knowledge about me to make substantiated inferences about my behavior," Spock says, back to sounding as stiff as he did when they'd started talking. "In any case, it is true that I have spent less time on my duties here than I should have. Logically speaking, I should go back now."

"Well, look," McCoy says, feeling a little guilty for pushing so hard. "Before you do, why don't you take a little time for yourself? Maybe even try living illogically for once—didn't we

say we were going to spend the whole day sightseeing?"

"That is indeed what you promised," Spock says slowly, still seeming unconvinced. "However, if you have had another so-called 'change of heart', I will not impose upon you further."

"Ha, like I would give you an excuse to call me a liar again," McCoy declares, waving the waiter over to ask for the bill. "A promise is a promise. Now, if you're ready, I've got an idea for what we should do next."

★✚★✚★

Renting a cheap hoverbike from a bike station around the corner, they set off, riding on a road running alongside the shoreline. Above them, the sky stretches out in a perfect, endless expanse of blue, not a single cloud in sight. Sunlight reflects off the waves lapping gently at the beach and makes the water sparkle, providing a natural accent to the vivid, clear aquamarine of the bay.

It's a warm, balmy day, warmer still with the way Spock is plastered against McCoy's back on the hoverbike, arms wound securely around his waist as he drives, but McCoy finds that he doesn't mind.

They stop at the top of a tall, rocky outcropping to admire the view, buying two drinks from the little old lady running a fruit juice stand nearby as they enjoy the cool sea breeze. The lady smiles at them and gives them a discount for being "such a polite couple", turning away to deal with another customer before McCoy can correct her misconception. Red-faced, he hurries Spock to finish his drink so that they can continue on their way.

Parking the hoverbike, they go down to the subterranean gardens. Inside the large, domed caverns, the only light comes from the bioluminescence of the multicolored flora, casting the whole area in an intimate glow. The narrow stone paths are tight for two people walking side-by-side, but they make it work, barely noticing the brush of a hand or the bump of an elbow as they marvel at the light patterns produced by different plants. Despite claiming to not have spent much time studying the biological sciences, Spock has a solid grasp of the basics, and they get into a spirited debate about the merits of gene splicing, based on a recent paper McCoy had read about experiments done on some of the bioluminescent fish from the Voroth Sea. They might have unintentionally spoiled the peaceful ambiance for several young couples who passed them, clearly looking for a romantic getaway spot, but McCoy was having too much fun arguing to feel guilty.

After getting tired of wandering around, they head to one of the famed Risan steam pools. Unfortunately, the place is packed, filled with beings of all shapes and colors all trying to find a place to sit and soak in the water, so rather than fight for a spot, they decide to just keep exploring.

Off to the side of the main pool, partially hidden by a large rock, there seems to be a stone statue placed next to a tiny pool of water, so they go over to take a closer look. From a distance, the pool appears empty, but upon closer inspection, they find that even though no one's soaking in it, the bottom of the pool is filled with various shiny objects—metal coins from planets all across the quadrant, along with a collection of miscellaneous trinkets.

"Looks like it's a wishing pool," McCoy says, nudging Spock with a grin. "Here, if you've

got a coin, toss it in, make a wish!"

Spock shakes his head. "Engaging in irrational behavior that has no grounding in scientific knowledge is illogical."

"Oh, c'mon Spock," McCoy wheedles, already having too much fun imagining Spock giving in. "Remember, this whole trip is about being illogical. Just give it a try, would you? Who knows, you might even have fun."

Spock makes a noise very much like a sigh. "If it will satisfy your penchant for illogic," he says, pulling a small metal disk from his pocket. He stares at it, turning it over in his fingers, and closes his eyes, taking a long breath before opening them again and tossing the coin in.

McCoy whistles in approval. "Good man. Wanna tell your doctor about it?"

Spock looks at him, then turns away. "The chances of it being granted are very slight," is all he says as he steps back from the pool. His expression hasn't changed, but McCoy gets the strangest feeling that he looks almost … melancholy.

The orange rays of the setting sun bathe everything in a soft, golden light. "Well," McCoy says, slightly disconcerted by the sudden awareness of how fast the time had passed. "The day's almost over now. Anything else you want to do before you go back to your logical way of life?"

Spock purses his lips, silent.

And then: "The Lohlunat."

McCoy furrows his eyebrows. "The Lo-what?"

"The Festival of the Moons. I have heard it takes place down by Suraya Bay."

"Oh, right, the festival. Yeah, I heard that too. You wanna go?"

"Yes. I was meaning to go see it. Would you accompany me?" Spock asks, turning back to face McCoy, something oddly vulnerable in his eyes.

With a request like that, what else can McCoy do but nod? "Yeah, of course. Let's go."

★✚★✚★

They get back to Suraya Bay just as the sun's edge finishes bleeding over the horizon, the sky streaked with hazy hues of reds, purples, and blues. All three of Risa's moons have risen, their full faces growing brighter as the night sets in and the stars emerge to speckle the darkening sky.

The bay is dotted with people, some dancing in little groups on the sand, others wading out into the shallows toward the boats gently bobbing offshore. From their position uphill from the beach, McCoy can see the boats glowing with warm lights, the decks covered with the moving shadows of more dancing festival-goers.

They leave the hoverbike and their shoes by the vegetation at the beach's edge and walk across the sand, rolling up their clothes as they too wade into the warm water. As they head toward one of the boats, tiny bioluminescent creatures swim all around them, blinking and shimmering like so many underwater fireflies.

"Do you even know how to dance?" McCoy asks when they've gotten close enough to hear the strains of music coming from the live band on the boat's deck, the water now high enough to lap at their knees.

"I have had lessons in a variety of dance styles since childhood."

McCoy goggles slightly. “Really? I didn’t think dancing was something Vulcans cared much for.”

Spock inclines his head. “Would you like me to demonstrate?”

Out of nowhere, McCoy’s heart starts a heavy, staccato beat. “Sure, show me what you got.”

He doesn’t shiver at the tingle he feels when he takes Spock’s offered hand, but it’s a close thing—and he can only hope that Spock doesn’t notice his nervous twitch when the band starts playing a slow, soulful melody, and Spock pulls him in close.

Cradled in each other’s arms, they sway together in the moonlight. The rhythm of the music blends together with the undulation of the waves against their legs and the shifting of the sand beneath their bare feet, weaving their every sense into the present moment.

It’s undoubtedly one of the most magical experiences McCoy has ever had—and nothing is more magical than Spock, who should look ridiculous with his robe hiked up and tied around his waist in a voluminous bulge to keep it dry, but who somehow still manages to radiate a regal elegance that takes McCoy’s breath away.

The song winds to a close, the faint sound of applause drifting across the waves, but though they stop dancing, neither of them let go.

Spock seems to study his face intently, his dark eyes shining in the night. “I find you fascinating,” he says, sounding like he’s making a declaration and a confession, all wrapped into one.

McCoy can’t keep the amusement off his face. “Oh. Thanks very much,” he says with an exaggerated lift of his eyebrows.

But Spock’s not done. “I have never met anyone like you.”

Vaguely, McCoy’s aware of his face getting warm. “Well, you just haven’t met many humans, that’s all.”

Spock shakes his head firmly. “I find it unlikely that any other human will be at all similar. You have a singularly brilliant mind, which rather than being compromised by your indulgence in shameless emotionality, instead thrives because of it. You have honored me today with your companionship.”

“Wasn’t any trouble. You’re not so bad yourself,” McCoy mumbles, awkwardly rocking back on his heels to diffuse his nervous tension when his foot slips. With an almighty splash, he falls backward into the water, pulling Spock down with him.

Being submerged is a shock, but the water’s warm enough that it’s not totally unpleasant, even though when McCoy manages to sit back up, he’s completely wet through.

“You alright?” he calls to Spock when he resurfaces, equally soaked.

“Yes,” Spock replies, sounding both surprised and disgruntled, his perfect bangs plastered in wet clumps across his forehead. Now he really does look absolutely ridiculous, but even like this, he’s the most beautiful person McCoy has ever seen—and maybe it’s the adrenaline rush, or maybe it’s the way the night seems to whisper with tales of passions from ages past, but McCoy is hit with the overwhelming urge to kiss him, and so he does.

Time seems to suspend, and everything else ceases to exist. The weight of their waterlogged clothes, the cool touch of the breeze against their wet skin—all of it disappears until there is nothing but the two of them, nothing but his lips against Spock’s and Spock’s lips pressing back against his.

It ends almost as unexpectedly as it had begun, both of them breaking apart to stare at each other.

Spock is the first to lean away, suddenly unable to meet McCoy's eyes. "I must tell you that I cannot return your feelings."

McCoy's stomach plummets. Despite the warmth of the water, a chill sets into his chest. "Sorry. God, I'm so sorry. I don't know what came over me," he says, hoping that he doesn't sound like a babbling lunatic.

The silence that falls is nothing short of oppressive. Spock opens his mouth like he's about to say something, but then doesn't—or maybe he does, and McCoy just doesn't hear it, not over the rushing of the blood in his ears and the slow crack of his breaking heart.

Everything feels so cold. "Well … I guess we'd better get out of here and dry off before we catch a chill."

Spock nods his agreement, and they set back without another word.

Returning the hoverbike and walking back to McCoy's rental villa is just as quiet. Inside, they strip off their wet clothing, changing into the bathrobes provided by the property as they toss everything into the in-unit cleaning processor.

The clothes are out in a few minutes, and McCoy turns away to give Spock some privacy as he redresses.

"I will have to go now."

McCoy turns back to see Spock standing at the door, those deep brown eyes shadowed as he looks steadily back. "Alright. Just … be safe. And don't forget to do things for yourself every now and then, will you?"

Spock nods, but doesn't break McCoy's gaze. For a moment, they just stand there, staring at each other—and then Spock's crossing the room in quick strides to grab McCoy's shoulders and pull him into another kiss.

Overwhelmed by the heat of Spock's body against his, McCoy can do nothing but kiss back, hands flying up to grip Spock's arms as they melt again into one. It's just like the last time, only more so, and the memory is enough to bring McCoy back to his senses, hardening his willpower enough to push Spock away.

Head reeling, he summons up his best glare, wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand. "I thought you said you didn't—"

"I said that I cannot, not that I do not," Spock admits quietly, his entire countenance downcast. "It is illogical, but I must tell you, that I found today … fun."

Eyes stinging, McCoy still does his best to smile. "Well, look at that. I guess Vulcans can have fun after all."

"Indeed," Spock replies, amusement briefly flickering in his gaze before fizzling out. "… I do not know how to say goodbye."

"Then don't try."

This time, when they kiss, it's deliberate and slow. For the last time, they hold each other close, chasing what little sweetness they can in the bitter taste of unspoken, hopeless longing.

When they release, Spock reaches beneath the collar of his robe to fiddle with something, pulling out a thin golden chain with a small metal coin hanging upon it.

"I would like you to have this," he says as he presses it into McCoy's hand, the metal still warm from his body heat. "Parted from me and never parted, never and always touching and touched."

"Bye," McCoy chokes out, barely trusting himself to say anything more—and then Spock is gone, the door closing quietly behind him with a final, solemn click.

★✚★✚★

The last night on Risa is a blur. McCoy showers and goes to bed. In the morning, he packs up all his stuff, checks out of the property, and gets back to the shuttleyard where all the other crewmen out on shore leave have gathered to take the shuttle back to the *Enterprise*.

Jim's waiting there for him with a bright smile and a friendly slap to the back. "So, how was your day in paradise with your new friend?" he asks, his grin taking a mischievous slant as he tries to needle McCoy for details. McCoy just shrugs and answers in bland, monosyllabic responses until he gets the hint and lays off.

"Aw, Bones, cheer up, there's plenty of fish in the sea. If it makes you feel any better, the galley's got something special planned tonight. You'll need to wear the dress uniform though—apparently the prince is feeling better, so we're going to be hosting the Vulcan royal delegation for dinner."

"Just what I need, more Vulcans and my neck in a sling," McCoy mutters.

Still, feeling sociable or not, he knows his duty as a senior officer, so come dinnertime, he's standing next to Jim in the main hangar deck, pulling glumly at the stiff collar of his dress blues as the honor guard lines up in front of the prince's landed shuttle.

Then, the shuttle's door opens, and McCoy forgets all about his uniform, going slack-jawed as the delegation disembarks. Because there, surrounded by a contingent of severe-looking Vulcan attendants, stands Spock, looking down the line of crewmen to meet McCoy's shocked stare.

He is stunning, dressed in a brown silken tunic that brings out the color of his eyes, and caught up in the whirling of his own thoughts, McCoy barely registers one of the attendants stepping forward to address the crew.

"His Royal Highness, Prince S'chn T'gai Spock," she announces before clearing the path for Spock's approach.

With every step Spock takes closer, the pendant around McCoy's neck seems to burn, as if reacting to the presence of its former owner. He's half-decided to make a break for it and damn the consequences, when Spock reaches them, stopping in front of Jim.

"Captain James Kirk," Jim says, introducing himself with a bow.

"Captain," Spock acknowledges, raising his hand in the familiar salute.

Jim smiles politely and gestures to McCoy, who stands frozen beside him. "My Chief Medical Officer, Doctor McCoy."

For the briefest of seconds, Spock pauses, his hesitation only perceptible to those who know the difference. But then, before McCoy can sink into the floor, he turns, fixing McCoy with a gaze filled with nothing but the most tender fondness.

"Doctor," he says, raising his hand again.

Heart in his throat, McCoy copies the motion. "Live long and prosper, Your Highness."

The corner of Spock's mouth twitches.

"Thank you, Doctor McCoy."

As they wait for the rest of the attendants to leave the shuttle, Jim turns to Spock, his

easy affability out in full force as he launches into some small talk. "First, Your Highness, let me express the pleasure of all of us at your recovery from your recent illness."

Spock nods. "Starfleet honors me with your concern."

"Which of the planets visited did Your Highness enjoy the most?"

"Each in its own way had its own merits. It would be illogical to pick one," Spock says, before glancing back at McCoy, their eyes meeting one more time. "… However, if I had to, I would say Risa. By all means, Risa. I will cherish my visit here, in memory, as long as I live."

And whatever sorrow he may feel, McCoy can't help but smile back, because even surrounded as they are, something about the moment still feels like theirs and theirs alone—and although they can neither of them go back, they still both have the untouchable memory of their one perfect day spent together on Risa, a planet they discovered to be truly filled with pleasures and excitements beyond all imagination.

★✚★✚★

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This zine would not have been possible without the diligent support and cooperative efforts of our Zine committee.
Thank you all! Your hard work, time, effort, and invaluable contributions have made this zine a success.
Working with as many people as we did, we received the combined voices, hours, and ideas of us all to move this zine forward. As our zine is so fittingly themed: we go together, or not at all.

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